

**Kingdom of Queens**

The story continues

# A dragon named Delightful

**Will  
Harvey**



All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher or author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

First Printing, 2019

ISBN 9781090500021

For Holly, Sam and Oliver

# Contents

1. Evilness
2. No Wi-Fi
3. The Professor
4. A bad day
5. A deceitful act
6. Tourism
7. War of injustice
8. Deception
9. A brief note
10. Recycling
11. Tegan's tantrum
12. Tasty Japanese tourists
13. Deri the Sleuth
14. Brathen's new home
15. Not enough rope
16. Lloyd and a companion
17. A delight for Arawn
18. Sleeping beauty
19. Men prefer blondes?
20. Fake dragon?
21. Dragon blood
22. Mental contact
23. UFO
24. Tom's plan
25. Crazy sister
26. Tom's hunch
27. Precious load
28. Misplaced vehicle
29. A long bus ride

30. All lies

31. Bandits

32. A familiar face

33. A new ruler?

34. Cures and potions

35. A suitable name

36. Chinese lantern

37. The awards

38. Cure all

Other books by Will Harvey

The Author

The continuing tale of the Kingdom of Queens.

# A dragon named Delightful

By Will Harvey



# Chapter 1

## Evilness

Finally, the Kingdom of Marutuk was at peace, but as anyone knows, peace is only ever a temporary thing.

A small pile of ashes, discarded in the far reaches of the Marutuk Kingdom, refused to blow away in the wind and refused to wash into the soil with the rain. The ashes sat in the centre of a patch of deadness. Nothing would grow near the grey flaky pile; nothing would grow through it. Every insect, bird and animal somehow knew to give it a wide berth. It was the cremated ashes of Queen Mererid.

For much of her life she wasn't evil. She wasn't exactly saintly either, but she did have certain virtues. Unfortunately, everything changed when her truly evil husband, King Worgin, died. He was wicked and selfish to the end. In a cunning effort to prevent an afterlife of eternal damnation, just before he died, he passed all his evilness on to his Queen. He could do this because as the head of the Kingdom, he possessed certain magical powers.

Some say that a residue of magic remains, no matter how transformed, no matter how decimated.

## **Chapter: 2**

### **No Wi-Fi**

Usually, without exception, only the firstborn of identical twins, ruled the Kingdom of Marutuk and controlled the dragons. Queen Caron and Queen Tegan were identical twins. However, unusually, they were born by caesarean – a procedure of the Netherworld, lands far beyond the Kingdom. The outcome of this meant that the natural way of things was disturbed. As a consequence, it became a shared throne. That was the way it had to be. It was a situation that had never happened in the Kingdom before.

Now it was the Kingdom of Queens.

It worked well, but as to be expected, the population of Marutuk had certain misgivings about the situation. King Java, their grandfather, was a hard act to follow. He was a wonderful, kind and caring leader. Fortunately, the Queens were equally kind and caring but these were early days. King Java was hands-on, inventive and innovative. To be blunt, Caron's and Tegan's skills mainly centred around social media, pop music and hair and beauty products. You may think that these attributes wouldn't contribute to an isolated, magical Kingdom, but you'd be wrong. Many women welcomed ways of making themselves look more attractive – and younger. They considered their musical tastes a great improvement on their grandpa's. People could now freely dance to their heart's content without having to learn the waltz and the quickstep. Of course, there was no technology to allow for any form of social media, but as an alternative, discussion groups, debates, and social gatherings became the norm. These gatherings or councils were the rudimentary beginnings of a form of parliament. People of the Kingdom now had a voice in how the Kingdom was run although the Queens would always have the last word.



# Chapter 3

## The Professor

Unfortunately, many people in the lands beyond the mountains, the ‘Netherworld’ as the Marutuk people called it, now knew about the isolated and hidden Kingdom. Some even knew about the dragons. A global magnate, Wurtherly, tried to invade the Kingdom, to his peril. It was a devious plan using several hot air balloons. This was one of the few ways of passing unhindered through the ‘technology’ barrier. This protective barrier encircled the Kingdom, high up in the surrounding mountains. It was a kind of magical forcefield that prevented technology from entering the Kingdom: This included aeroplanes, helicopters and anything else that contained modern-day machinery. Fortunately, Wurtherly invasion failed because of the dragons and King Java’s magic, but he came worrying close to being successful.

Because of this, a new defence strategy had to be set up. This was a job for the newly formed council. Of course, there were always the dragons, powerful and reassuring, with their strength and fiery breath. However, they would only respond to commands from the Queens. These commands were in the form of hoots from the gold dragon horn. The number of times the horn was blown determined which of the many commands the dragons had to follow. As an unprecedented consequence of caesarean birth, this horn now had to be blown by the two Queens simultaneously, using a special ‘Y’ shaped attachment. One Queen blowing the horn on her own had no effect. If anything happened to one of the Queens, quite simply, the dragons would not respond and the Kingdom would be exposed. It’s worth mentioning that there was another way although an unreliable way of the Queens controlling the dragons. It required a deep concentration of thought and willpower – a form of telepathy. This was something evil King Worgin had mastered, but for Queen Tegan and Queen Caron, it was early days.

To address this and other problems, the Kingdom required a genius, something the Kingdom had never really required before. Naturally, there were no colleges or universities in Marutuk. Only rudimentary schools existed to educate and inform. Simply put, the people of the Kingdom didn’t need to be highly educated – especially to university

degree standards. Living in the Kingdom was humble and uncomplicated – that was the chosen way. It was widely believed that too much knowledge could be a dangerous thing. First and foremost, they were taught to be happy, thoughtful and kind. What else really mattered?

The Queens, with the help of the newly formed council, decided that it was their father's job, Larry, to find this natural genius. At first, choosing Larry as the genius seeker may have seemed an odd choice, but as his previous occupation was an airline pilot, it turned out that he was the most qualified person in the land. After several days of deep thought, he came up with the idea of the Kingdom having a chess tournament. It would be a tournament of all tournaments. Everybody could enter. Chess schools were set up and even home tuition for the elderly. After a fixed period of one month's practice, over two hundred people registered for the ordeal and then the heats began. Round after round took place until eventually the hopefuls were whittled down to two: Aderyn and Deri. Aderyn was an old lady, an agony aunt, often consulted for her wisdom. Deri just happened to be Odela's son. Odela was the ill-fated midwife who, many years ago, got the first-born twins mixed up. This resulted in King Java's brother, Rosh, ruling the Kingdom – which led to its temporary downfall. *It's all in the first part!*

The tournament was tense, playing on for many hours and then finally Deri made his killer move and yelled, 'checkmate!'

It was all over. Larry wrote out a special certificate and declared Deri, a professor. It was all completely legitimate and above board – at least, for the Kingdom of Marutuk. Professor Deri now had to justify his qualification and swat up in all worldly things. The Kingdom happened to have a modest lending library which, over the last few decades, had become adequately stocked with imported Netherworld books. Most were written in English but some had been translated into Welsh. It was no easy job being a professor, even in the Kingdom. Fortunately, Deri proved to be a quick learner.

Once his qualification was substantiated, the Professor began using his wisdom immediately: Two airtight bellows were fashioned using dragon's bladders. Dragon's bladders were not your ordinary bladders. So resilient was their composition that they were completely fireproof as well as airtight.

They had to be tested. It called for a ceremony, any excuse, and when there was a ceremony, it involved the dragons. Professor Deri presented a dragon *bellow* to each of the queens. They blew and blew until they were both completely inflated with their special breath. It

was now time to test the Professor's theory. Specially made pipes attached both bellows to the magical golden horn. The Queens stood back while Professor Deri proceeded to squeeze the bellows together, four times. The horn blasted out four ear-grating screeches. Instantly, the Dragons, led by the Queens' dragon, Brathen, began their display in the skies above them.

The bellows were a complete success. For the first time ever, the dragons could be controlled without the Kingdom's rulers. It was truly brilliant. Now, if anything was to befall either one of the Queens, the dragons could still be controlled.

However, now there was a new concern.

If the bellows should ever fall into the wrong hands, chaos could ensue. Because of this, the bellows were locked securely in two chests made from dragon's bones. These chests were kept in the boudoirs of the respective Queens. A special gold key around each of the queen's necks was the only way to access the bellows.

Professor Deri's next undertaking was to create an army. Many of the Kingdom's people were puzzled by this notion. After all, the Kingdom of Marutuk was and always had been, a non-violent place even when king Worgin was on the throne. Besides, if there ever would be fighting to be done, the dragons would do it for them. Nevertheless, the Professor insisted that history dictated that an army of sorts was necessary to protect any Kingdom, no matter how small or how magical.

The recruiting began. Almost every male below seventy applied to join. Even several women fancied their chances of becoming a soldier. Perhaps there was a certain amount of bottled-up aggression in the people. Naturally, it would only be a small army – perhaps forty or so. A selection process was called for. An assault course was constructed. It had everything to test human fitness: climbing frames, underwater troughs, tightropes, climbing poles, obstacle courses, weight carrying, and so on. Everyone was invited to have a go. In no time, the fittest people in the Kingdom were whittled down to forty. Training of the selected people, now followed. For some unexplainable reason, Professor Deri decided that they had to be adept with spears, bows and arrows and combat fighting. The fact that the dragons always handled the aggressive stuff, was immaterial.

Eventually, the Professor was satisfied with the forty-strong, Marutuk army and presented all of them with a special medal and a green hat. The assault course remained for any would-be masochist who wished to have a go and become thoroughly wet, battered and bruised.

Now, the Kingdom had measures in place for a minor conflict and the absence of either queen.

## Chapter 4

### A bad day

Caron and Tegan were identical, uncannily identical. Even approaching their thirtieth birthday there was no discernible divergence. To add to this problem, they insisted on having the same hairstyles and even wearing similar clothes and makeup. This did no favours for anybody. Even their parents, Larry and Jennifer, sometimes found it a struggle to tell them apart.

Queen Tegan was engaged to Gareth who happened to be a former Netherworlder. Queen Caron was engaged to Arawn, the Queens' Knight. One significant difference though, Queen Tegan had children: two boisterous, twin boys from a previous unsuccessful marriage.

The Queens' thirtieth birthday was to be a big occasion. That's what the Kingdom liked, any excuse to let their hair down. On big occasions, food was aplenty and drink flowed freely, but most of all, the dragons did their spectacular, death-defying aerial display. This occasion, however, was very special indeed. Besides being their thirtieth birthday, they were both getting married.

A double wedding was the natural choice for identical twins.

After the lengthy wedding ceremony, Larry passed the golden horn with the special 'Y' piece attached, to the Queens. Together, they blew as hard as they could. Suddenly and noisily, the dragons began to stir within their mountain caves and then, spontaneously, they launched themselves from their ledges and were in flight. Dragon Brathen led the display with a remarkable loop the loop – touching the clouds and then almost brushing against the ground. The entire population of the Kingdom oohed and aahed and some of the younger audience screamed. The dragons always did the people proud. Brathen, the head dragon, finished off by doing a hovering bow to the queens.

Everything was perfect and everyone was happy. Could it really stay like this?

By the next morning, everything was put back to how it was, a neat and tidy Kingdom. The food trestles were put away, the decorations taken down and all the litter bins contents taken away to be recycled. Tegan woke in her huge bed with her new husband, Gareth, by her

side. Caron did the same with her new husband, Arawn, by her side. The queens quietly parted from their snoozing husbands and leant out of their castle windows, gazing upon their beautiful Kingdom. As always, it was a glorious morning and they had both eaten far too much. As their bedrooms were next to each other, they caught sight of each other.

‘Morning, fancy jogging off some of yesterday’s food?’ said Caron.

‘Excellent idea, see you down in the courtyard in five,’ said Tegan.

At that time in the morning, very few people were about, which was convenient. Being royalty and head of the realm did come with certain irritations, in particular, the curtsying, bowing and continual ‘your royal highness’ salutations from the people.

‘Which way?’ asked Tegan, jogging on the spot.

‘I thought we’d go as far as the apple orchard.’

‘OK, fine. Quite a way. Should be ready for a hearty breakfast when we get back.’

Moments later, they were running out of the courtyard, across the draw bridge and through the town square. They passed the empty market trestles, the church, the man-made beach and the football pitch. It was a compact town, but it had everything you could ever wish for. It wasn’t long before they were leaving the cobbled streets behind and venturing into parts of the Kingdom few ever visited. This was a shame as the Kingdom had every credential for being paradise: Undulating grassy plains interrupted by gentle streams, neatly organised forests and all surrounded by impossibly high, snow-capped mountains. By rights, the open plains should have been a frozen, wasteland, but this was one of the benefits of having dragons overseeing the Kingdom. They reached the Woods-with-no-wood, appropriately named as nothing now grew in this area – for a good reason.

‘Got a stone in my shoe. You carry on, I’ll catch you up,’ shouted Tegan.

In the time it took to untie her shoelace and take off her shoe, a strong breeze had stirred. Tegan’s long blonde hair jostled in the wind and then from nowhere, dust, possibly ash, filled the air and smothered her. Moments later the air cleared and the wind calmed.

‘Took your time,’ teased Caron.

‘Really strange – caught in a gust of wind and got covered in dust,’ said Tegan.

‘No breeze here,’ said Caron calmly. ‘So, how’s married life?’

‘Give me a chance, only got married yesterday. Tell you something though, you’ve definitely got the better deal,’ said Tegan.

‘Not following, Gareth’s a lovely man?’

‘Gareth, lovely? Hardly, a bit of a wimp, more like. I’ve seen Arawn’s six-pack. I bet other parts of him are equally as impressive.’

Caron was taken aback. She didn’t know how to react. It was a side to her sister she had never seen before – a side she didn’t very much care for.

‘He took on your twin boys from your first marriage and loves them as his own,’ pointed out Caron.

‘He was obviously desperate.’

This pretty much killed the conversation. Tegan eventually broke the silence as they were returning through the quaint cobbled streets of the town.

‘Good God, just look at these hovels. Could you honestly live in one of them?’

‘They’re not hovels. I’m sure they’re lovely and cosy inside,’ retorted Caron.

They ran down another street. At the end was old Iwan, sweeping the pavement with his broom.

‘Look at that old fool, all he’s doing is moving the dust about!’

‘Iwan? He’s a sweet old man and he’s doing a good job,’ insisted Caron. ‘Tegan, what’s wrong with you? Why have you suddenly become so bitter? It’s not like you.’

‘Whatever,’ said Tegan, apathetically.

If Caron had cared to look closely into Tegan’s eyes, she would have noticed that they had darkened, taking on a menacing look. Tegan wasn’t aware of it, but she was now possessed with evil – the evilness of Queen Mererid. However, this affliction wouldn’t come to light for some time.

Another bad thing happened that day, although, totally unrelated.

It was imports day.

A long time ago, King Java made an arrangement with the Netherworld. In exchange for pure dragon gold, various commodities, anything from cement to books, would be loaded into an import’s

baskets. This basket was collected from a lookout post on the edge of the technology barrier, by Brathen, the Queens' dragon. Naturally, Brathen wasn't all that keen on venturing into the icy cold, snow-covered lands, so far away from the Kingdom, but this was one of her tasks.

As usual, Brathen set off with a soap-bar-sized piece of gold and a shopping list for next time. Twenty minutes later, she returned with a basket full of goods. Everything requested, seemed to be there: Toiletries, food spices, books, musical instruments, make-up, clothes and fabric, but something was there that hadn't been requested. The town folk unloading the basket had never seen anything like it before. Hidden under a couple of boxes of shampoo, was a black menacing Netherworld machine. At first, it remained dormant and foreboding, but suddenly, from each of its four corners, it made a loud whirring noise. Then, totally unexpected, it immediately shot into the air. It hovered above them for several seconds and then flew high above the Kingdom. Fortunately, Larry and Gareth were nearby, checking off the list. Naturally, they knew what it was.

'A drone! How the heck, is it working here?' puzzled Gareth.

It was a good question. The magical technological barrier surrounding the Kingdom should have been blocking the radio signal controlling it, but clearly, it wasn't.

'Only one possibility, someone inside the barrier, is controlling it,' said Larry.

'What, someone in the Kingdom?'

'Wouldn't have thought so. More likely, someone has got passed the military lookout posts and is up there looking down on us,' said Larry.

The drone was inevitably causing a lot of interest. Professor Deri was quickly on the scene. After all, he was the Kingdom's problem solver. Gareth brought him up to speed on exactly what it was and the crucial fact that it carried a little box that was sending moving pictures of the kingdom to someone many miles away. Naturally, the professor was fascinated with this strange Netherworld technology. He thought deeply for a few seconds and then had something very relevant to say.

'On no account must it be allowed to capture the sight of a dragon!'

But it was too late. Queen Caron's curiosity had got the better of her. She had joined the ever-growing crowd beneath the drone. In her mind, there was only one logical way of dealing with the pesky device, but there was no time to fetch the golden horn – and her sister. She decided to try something different. She relaxed, closed her



eyes and focused all her concentration on Brathen. To the Queen's surprise, the dragon responded and launched herself out of her cave. Seconds later, it was all over. If truth were known, it was a pretty tasteless meal, apart from the lithium polymer battery, which Brathen found quite tasty. However, the damage was done. The sight of a dragon had been captured, most likely in ultra-HD – the cat was out of the bag.

'Now what do we do?' fretted Gareth.

'Nothing we can do. The video will soon be on social media and then it will go global,' said Larry factually.

'Whoever it is controlling the drone will take some time to make their way back through the technology barrier into the Netherworld. The Queens could send the dragons up there to look for the offender,' suggested the Professor.

'It would mean searching hundreds of square miles of inhospitable mountain tops. Don't think the dragons would be too pleased about that. Face it, the damage is done,' said Larry.

'Good job we have an army, then,' concluded the Professor.

## Chapter 5

### A deceitful act

The Kingdom now played a waiting game.

Queen Caron enjoyed her morning run. It became a regular thing – the same route – her times got quicker and quicker. She went on her own which was no bad thing. Her sister had become irritable company. Far better to be her own company and relish the many delights the Kingdom had to offer. You could almost set your watch by her, so regular were her morning runs. This situation could only be taken advantage of...

One early morning, Tegan dressed in one of her sister's pyjamas and waited for Caron to leave for her run. She knew her sister would be gone for exactly fifty minutes. This was plenty of time for what despicable deed Tegan had in mind. She left Gareth sleeping and entered her sister's bedroom.

'What's wrong, sweetheart? Not running today?' asked an unsuspecting Arawn.

'No, not today. I've realised that I'm neglecting my... husband. It's only fair that I attend to his needs instead,' she said saucily.

Arawn certainly wasn't going to complain. He noticed her darkened eyes, but other than that, nothing untoward registered, apart from the heightened passion and enthusiasm. A while later, the despicable act had been committed.

The order of the day was that Arawn conducted the morning parade for his soldiers in the courtyard. However, due to these unforeseen circumstances, today, he was several minutes late. By the time Caron returned from her run, Tegan was back in her own bedroom and Arawn was, as usual, bawling his head off, at the soldiers.

As no one suspected anything, it became a regular occurrence. Tegan had no time for Gareth, he was a poor substitute for Arawn. She treated him with contempt and ridicule. The deceitful masquerade could have gone on for weeks if it wasn't for the boy's night out at the local (and only) inn. Gareth, Arawn, Larry and Professor Deri met up every Friday for a few beers.

‘You really can’t get any better than this,’ said Larry, raising his first glass of beer.

‘Probably for you, but not for me,’ moaned Gareth.

‘Why, what could be that bad in this paradise?’ asked Larry.

‘It’s Tegan, she really is getting intolerable. She talks to me like dirt. Doesn’t even want to sleep in the same bed as me,’ groaned Gareth as he finished off his first beer.

‘I know it’s no consolation, but I have the opposite problem; Caron is wearing me out – every morning. Consequently, I’m late for the morning parade. I never thought I’d say it, but you can have too much passion,’ said Arawn.

‘Ahh, the troubles of the heart. It can affect us in many ways. Anyway, it serves you right for being such an ugly devil. So, Caron doesn’t go for her morning run anymore?’ quizzed Deri.

‘Unfortunately, not,’ replied Arawn.

‘Strange. Obviously, it must be Tegan I see running in the morning when I fetch the milk,’ said Larry without thinking of the possible implications.

‘Tegan hates running. She got rid of her running shoes a few weeks ago,’ said Gareth gloomily as he gulped his way through his second beer.

‘Hang on, if it’s not Tegan out running in the morning, it has to be Caron. So, who is... who am I? Surely, I would know,’ shrieked Arawn.

‘Oh, dear. Sometimes, even as their father, I can’t tell them apart,’ said Larry.

Instantly, they all knew what was going on and realised Tegan’s scale of deceitfulness. A short time later after finishing off his second beer, Gareth had something relevant to say,

‘It’s almost as though she’s possessed, with some kind of evil.’

‘An odd question, but does anyone know what route the queens took when they ran together,’ asked Deri.

‘I would think the same route Caron runs now, to the apple orchard and back,’ said Gareth.

‘That’ll take her past the Woods-with-no-wood. I have a very bad feeling about this,’ said Professor Deri. ‘I think we need to go for a walk.’

By the time all four had reached the Wood-with-no-wood, it was going dark, but there was still enough daylight to see the scattered ashes of dead Queen Mererid. No longer was there a neat pile, impervious to rain or wind. The evil contained within the ashes had been released. Now they knew they couldn't strictly blame Queen Tegan for her actions.

'Now what do we do?' groaned Gareth.

'She can easily pass her evilness on... if she desires to,' said Deri knowledgeably.

'Yes, but that person would become evil. You can't wish evilness on anyone. The Kingdom's people are a very fearful lot. They know if they are saturated with evil, the dragons won't want them when they die. No one wants to be cremated,' said Arawn.

'More to the point, do we tell Caron?' asked Larry.

The situation couldn't be allowed to continue. Professor Deri would have to use all his brainpower to come up with a solution – and quickly. It seemed the Kingdom was now ruled, partly, by an evil person.

## Chapter 6

### Tourism

Social media had done its worst. Video footage of the Kingdom and dragon Brathen was all over the net. It could have been faked, but when it came to something totally unbelievable and incredulous, many people were easily taken in.

Suddenly, people in their thousands wanted to visit the Patagonian mountains. The fact that it was an intolerably cold landscape, covered in snow and ice, made no difference. Tour companies had no choice but to oblige. After all, there was money to be made. The organised crowds, brought in by helicopters, swamped the border controls. Fast food restaurants of every known brand took advantage and were erected on the icy crags of the mountain. The military had no choice but to retreat, let the mayhem ensue and stay in their cramped lookout posts – occasionally popping out for a double cheeseburger. Specialised clothing was provided to keep out the cold and refreshment booths were laid on every quarter of a mile on route to the edge of the Kingdom.

Special viewing platforms were constructed, overlooking the Kingdom. The Marutuk people were like goldfish in a bowl. Everything they did, their whole lives were constantly watched through high-powered binoculars and telescopes – naturally, provided by the tour company. It became a booming tourist destination. There was no stopping the popularity of the exotic holiday experience.

Of course, what the tourist were really waiting for was a glimpse of the magical dragons. All day and all night, crowds gathered on the viewing platforms overlooking the Kingdom. There was no break from the constant observation from the tourists, all wanting their money's worth. Eventually, the dragons had to perform. One of their prime functions was to keep the Kingdom warm with their fiery breath. Without this, the Kingdom would cool down to a sub-zero climate and the people would eventually perish.

It had to happen. The Kingdom's people, especially the elderly, were beginning to complain about feeling a chill in the air. The Queens were forced to summon the dragons for their services. The fact that they would be observed by many hundreds of Netherworlders was an

unfortunate consequence, they had a job to do.

In response to the appearance of the magnificent creatures, the mountains spontaneously lit up with countless camera flashes. If ever the existence of dragons was doubted, there was now positive proof in the form of terabytes of video footage and thousands of photos.

All this could only increase the influx of tourists to the area. Demand for the extraordinary excursion outstripped availability. People were desperate to see the mythical creature. Even with all the evidence, some people still doubted their existence, suspecting it was all faked. They simply had to see the dragons in the flesh. The sight of a dragon surpassed just about anything else in life.

It was an understatement to say things were out of control.

For thousands of years, the Protectorate (the society to protect the anonymity of the dragons) had been completely effective. Now they were thwarted by the seemingly harmless, social media. Perhaps they were expecting it. Perhaps it was inevitable. After all, a secret cannot be kept indefinitely. One thing's for sure, they knew things would get far worse.

And they did.

It wasn't enough to just look at the dragons and gaze wistfully upon the Kingdom. Two tourists, young men, managed to sneak through to the viewing platform wearing wingsuits complete with parachutes underneath their coats. Ideally, they wanted to fly with the dragons, but the dragons hadn't made an appearance. Their two-hour viewing time was almost up, it was now or never. The two men, hastily took off their coats, revealing the flying suits, climbed onto the platform rail and launched themselves into the abyss. Many of the spectators gasped, some screamed, but many applauded their bravery. If anything, there was a certain amount of envy.

At first, the winged men glided, effortlessly through the crisp air. Eventually, they would have to open their chutes, but not until the last possible moment. Several people in the Kingdom spotted the strangely dressed intruders. They had no worries. More than likely, a couple of dragons would soon be on the scene to catch them with their talons and gently place them back on the mountain ridge. Regretfully, however, Queen Tegan was watching from her castle balcony. There was no compassion, certainly no forgiveness, in her eyes, they were invading the Kingdom. Invaders had to be dealt with firmly and swiftly. Moments later, two dragons were in the air, rapidly approaching the men in flying suits. It was against the dragon's nature to unnecessarily harm anyone but they were being overruled. Queen

Tegan's mental influence was strong and uncompromising. She too had discovered that she could control the dragons by willpower alone. The commotion of the Kingdom's people happened to alert Queen Caron to her window, but it was too late. For a short time, the men screamed in agony as the dragon's breath incinerated them. Before the cremated remains hit the ground, the dragons caught and devoured their unexpected meal. Everyone, except for Queen Tegan, was in a state of shock. The spectators, the Kingdom's people and even Queen Caron were stunned into silence. Every moment of the travesty had been captured by countless mobile phones and video cameras. Not a sound was uttered for some time, but then the shock developed into screams. Panic ensued as the spectators scrambled to get off the viewing platforms. People were crushed and trod on in the mayhem. The tourist boom to this location was over in an instant.

Social media came into play again. All it took was a few posts to spark a worldwide frenzy. Hundreds of negative remarks followed spurring hatred towards the dragons and the Kingdom. In hours, the public anger had escalated to all world leaders. Something had to be done – the Kingdom had to be dealt with. Dragons couldn't be allowed to roam free, and kill people. They were a threat, a liability, a danger to the public. The dragons had to be eliminated and the people of the Marutuk Kingdom held responsible for allowing such an injustice to happen. Taxes paid for the politicians and the armed forces. Immediate action was demanded.

It would be easy to blame Queen Tegan for the calamity, but in truth, things were already getting out of hand. The people of the Kingdom were sick and tired of being pried upon twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The high-powered telescopes during the day and night vision cameras at night were an infringement of their privacy. However, no one in the Netherworld gave two hoots about the Kingdom's people and their rights.

It was called the Netherworld for a good reason and that reason was now becoming blatantly clear.

Years ago, an arrangement was made jointly by the military and King Java to keep the Kingdom hidden and protected. This status quo had lasted for almost seventy years, but now, people looked at the agreement with incredulity.

All governments came together with a common cause. A pooling of knowledge was encouraged.

A dragon was considered virtually indestructible. After all, its constituent parts were made from inorganic things such as gold and

diamonds. Its skin was tougher than any man-made material and its blood and tears had magical properties. However, dragons did have a particular vulnerability: It had been noticed that when severely cold, a dragon couldn't fly as its wings were too stiff to function. They would take advantage of this weakness.

Eventually, a plan was put together. There was no particular rush, the Marutuk Kingdom wasn't going anywhere soon. It had been there for many centuries. A new, dragon-effective weapon – a specially made freeze gun, had to be constructed. The technology already existed, but extensive development was required. Essentially, the weapon had to be able to squirt copious amounts of liquid nitrogen, at a distance of at least twenty metres. They were confident that liquid nitrogen, at a temperature of minus 196 degrees, would freeze the dragon's wings, making them incapable of flying. However, never underestimate the size of a dragon, an awful lot of liquid nitrogen would be required. Once a dragon was incapacitated, it had to be captured. They would figure out how to kill it, later. Specially nets made of Darwin's bark spider silk were woven to ensnare the incapacitated creature. As a precaution, the invading army would wear suits made of heat-resistant tantalum carbide to protect them from being incinerated with the inevitable dragon's fiery breath.

Needless to say, the military was very proud of themselves. They were convinced that now, they had the means to defeat the fabled dragons and all the magic that comes with them. No one was exactly sure what particular magic the invasion force would encounter. However, the Kingdom had an army of forty, the Netherworld had an army of twenty million. Clearly, a slight disadvantage to the Kingdom, whatever magic was to behold.

Naturally, the Protectorate was not prepared to let the matter rest. They had vowed to protect the dragons for eternity. It is important to know that members of the Protectorate were found in all walks of life: this included politicians, the military and the media. They would go to any lengths to protect the Kingdom.

Quite simply, an invasion was out of the question.



## Chapter 7

### War of injustice

Firstly, they installed state-of-the-art video equipment on the viewing platforms, looking down on the Kingdom. The Kingdom had to be studied in depth to find out its weaknesses and routines. No longer were the public or the press allowed near the Kingdom, but the military pledged that when the invasion began, the entire event would be videoed live in all its glory and gory details.

The Netherworld as a whole decided that North America was best suited and best situated to deal with the situation. Naturally, this meant that they would suffer any loss of life and fund the invasion. After all, Patagonia was on their continent, if not exactly in their country. Besides, other countries were not entirely comfortable about their people being potentially incinerated or eaten by dragons.

Hundreds of hot air balloons would be used to invade the Kingdom. This mode of transport had been previously proven to breach the technology barrier. However, they still fell prey to the dragon's fiery breath so their entire construction had to be fireproof.

Almost exactly twelve months after the men in winged suits had been devoured, everything was ready. A large flat plain near the mountains was filled with menacing black hot air balloons, fully inflated and poised for lift-off.

Three days later, the wind was in the right direction and the military manoeuvres began. It was a day of bittersweet celebrations. The public had waited a long time for retribution. As promised, everything was filmed for television. Everyone in the world had a virtual ringside seat. They watched the special freeze guns being loaded into the heat-resistant baskets, followed by large cylinders of liquid nitrogen. Then they watched the soldiers, dressed in heat-resistant outfits climb into the baskets. Finally, they watched the countless hot air balloons rise from the ground and slowly head towards the Kingdom. A short interlude now followed while the balloons travelled across the Patagonian mountains to their destination. It was all terribly exciting.

Two hours later, the broadcast resumed, showing the countless menacing black balloons passing silently over the now, disused look-out posts. The invisible technology barrier posed no threat or

hindrance to the low-tech flying balloons. Everything was going according to plan. Suddenly, the Kingdom appeared below, leaving the snow-covered mountains and the icy cold air behind. The strategically placed cameras followed every inch of their progress. Slowly, the balloons began to descend. The rest of the world waited with bated breath. It wouldn't be long now. Every soldier was armed and ready.

Then, without warning, what the Netherworld onlookers were waiting for, happened. A sole dragon flew out of his cave and headed directly for one of the balloons. This was exactly what the soldiers had trained for. Without hesitation and compassion, they fired their freeze guns. The dragon was a sitting duck – impossible to avoid being soaked with the deadly liquid. Instantly, the dragon was petrified, unable to move, unable to fly. It fell helplessly and clumsily out of the sky and hit the ground with the force of a meteorite. Instantly, its wings, neck and body shattered and splintered into many pieces. The green grass below was littered with frozen dragon fragments. The rest of the world cheered and rejoiced at the travesty. There was no need for the nets this time, the dragon was certainly dead. It was almost too easy, but it was early days.

Moments later, the full wrath of the dragons was leashed upon the invaders in the balloons. Dozens of dragons filled the skies, weaving in and out of the balloons. The fiery dragon breath filled the air, but thanks to the high-tech materials, the balloons and soldiers were impervious to the flames and searing heat. Gallons and gallons of liquid nitrogen squirted out of the special guns and soaked the targets. There was no escape for the dragons. Several lost control of their wings and smashed into the mountainsides, others froze stiff and fell out of the sky. It was a terrible day for the fabled creature. A few younger, more agile dragons managed to put off the inevitable and eat a soldier or two. However, dressed in their fire-resistant clothing, they left a bitter taste. It was riveting viewing for the billions of Netherworld people. Every dragon that hit the ground or mountain and shattered into pieces was met with rousing cheers. The death of just two men in wingsuits had instigated this war, but clearly, this kind of revenge had no bounds. The people, stirred up into a frenzy by social media, would not be satisfied until all the dragons were gone.

Half an hour later, not one dragon was left in the Kingdom. All had met their death – shattered into pieces on the ground. The Kingdom's people were distraught, horrified and in deep shock. The balloons could now safely land, allowing the soldiers to disembark and turn on the people. Only three soldiers had been lost to the dragons, but that was three too many. The Kingdom's people had to answer for it. The

spears and bows and arrows of the small forty-strong Kingdom army were no match for the fifty, armed soldiers. Perhaps, if the Kingdom's army hadn't made the first move, there wouldn't have been so much bloodshed, but they did. It was a futile attempt with an arrow that went astray, but that was enough provocation for the soldiers to open fire. It was a massacre, all the forty-strong Kingdom's army, dead in as many seconds.

This was the end. The Marutuk Kingdom had lost their dragons, their army – their soul. The people were shocked, stunned and openly wept. The Queens were powerless to do anything despite their magical powers. It was an awful day, but despite this, much of the world celebrated as they watched the injustice. Hysteria had been nurtured. An enemy of the worst sort had successfully fashioned. It was an enemy formed by ignorance, proving that there is always a certain fear of the unknown. If there were any doubts, it was now clear how an alien visit from outer space would be treated, no matter how placid their nature.

The soldier's instructions were quite clear: eradicate the dragons and impair the Kingdom. It was a completely successful mission. Without the dragons, the remaining people in the Kingdom would undoubtedly perish in the fullness of time.

You would think that this was enough, the wrath of the Netherworld had sufficed, but you'd be wrong. Another single thoughtless comment on one of the many social media platforms:

*'Do dragons lay eggs? The remaining Kingdom's people are angry and they have magic.'*

This was enough to rekindle the hysteria. Clearly, the world's people would not be at ease until the Kingdom had been completely obliterated.

In truth, this was exactly what the heads of government wanted. A short time later, a small nuclear device was dropped from a plane, many miles above the Kingdom. The Netherworld public watched the horrific event on their televisions, on the specially erected big screens in the towns and cities and on their smartphones. The bomb pierced the technological barrier and exploded at ground level in the centre of the Kingdom. They witnessed the total destruction of the Kingdom and the beginnings of the formation of the mushroom cloud. Then, all the video equipment failed – destroyed by the blast and heat. For quite a while, there was an eerie silence as people watched the blank screens. It was what they wanted, wasn't it? It was what they had campaigned for – demanded. Be careful what you wish for, resounded in many

people's heads. Billions of people had been carried along with the bleating and irrational rantings of the thoughtless and the uncompassionate. Social media allows these sorts of people to prosper.

It was time for the US President to make an appearance. What he had to say was translated into all languages and shown in every country:

‘People of the world, we are here to listen and serve. We are held in this office to respond to the wishes of the people. We have successfully done what you have asked for... no, demanded. Whether it has been right or wrong, this is for you to decide. The assumed threat from the fabled creature has been eliminated. The magical Kingdom of Marutuk has been destroyed along with all its people. This is what you asked for – we have complied. This deed is on your consciences, not ours, your servants.’

It was a very solemn speech indeed. No smiles, no applause, no further questions. The Netherworld people suddenly realised what they had willingly instigated.

It was now the turn of a nuclear weapons expert to say a few words:

‘At 15:30 local time, a thermonuclear device with a yield of 20 megatons was successfully detonated on the surface of the Marutuk Kingdom. The radius of the fallout is currently 120 miles from ground zero. The Patagonian ice fields, latitude 48 to 50 degrees, now has an exclusion zone of fifty miles radius. This will stay in force for seven hundred years until the radiation has fallen to a safe level. Any questions?’

‘Does that mean no one can go near the Patagonian ice fields for seven hundred years?’ asked one reporter.

‘The most southerly part, correct. Unless, of course, you want to die from radiation poisoning.’

‘Did they suffer?’ asked a female reporter...

After this travesty, social media significantly remoulded itself. People were no longer easily drawn into hateful, hysteria, fuelled by self-gratification and conspiracy. Everyone had a mind of their own, it was about time they started using it.

## Chapter 8

### Deception

Meanwhile, the Kingdom carried on as usual. Most people were now aware that Queen Tegan was thoroughly evil, but as a consolation, Queen Caron was not.

Yes, it had all been a charade. Apparently, it was what the people wanted, but certainly not what the Protectorate or the rational world's governments would allow. It had taken a year to create the computer-generated images to fool the public into thinking that a real war was taking place. It was all performed in front of green screens in a film studio at a top-secret location. The dragons and Kingdom were all CGI. The state-of-the-art video recording equipment had digitally captured every detail of the Kingdom, to be manipulated in a powerful computer program. Obviously, the nuclear device and its devastating effects were also a very convincing simulation.

It was a devious deception, but the intrusive and continual observation of the Marutuk Kingdom had to stop. It was a violation of the Maratukian's human rights. They were human after all. This was something the tour companies and social media had disregarded. Naturally, consenting to genocide and the wilful extinction of such a wonderful creature would have been unforgivable. For any empathetic government, it would have been highly irresponsible.

The problem was now maintaining the deception. Several Netherworld people knew the truth, it couldn't be helped. Enforcing this deception was the responsibility of the Protectorate. Their methods, throughout the centuries, had sometimes proved quite brutal.

## Chapter 9

### A brief note

The Kingdom had a problem, perhaps more of an inconvenience than a problem. The imports, exports arrangement, basically a gold bar in exchange for commodities, had been suspended. Dragon Brathen couldn't possibly visit the lookout post with so many tourists about. However, for some time, the viewing platforms, high above the Kingdom, had been empty. No one seemed to be prying anymore and the surveillance equipment, video cameras etc., had also been removed. Perhaps, it was now safe for Brathen to go and fetch supplies from the lookout post.

Queen Caron summoned dragon Brathen telepathically. Minutes later, Brathen landed next to her, causing a minor earth tremor.

'Hi Babes, love what you've done with your scales... been preening? Would you mind going and fetching the supplies, please?' asked Queen Caron. She knew a little flattery always helped when it was a tall order.

Slightly disgruntled, the enormous dragon set off on her own towards the mountain peaks. Quickly she was out of sight. Minutes later, she returned empty talon-ed.

'Where are the supplies?' asked Queen Caron, puzzled.

Brathen was clearly agitated, making unusual snorting noises.

'OK, OK, you want me to come with you? lower your neck then,' said Queen Caron, assertively.

Larry and Arawn did their best to discourage her, but she was stubborn to the end. She was far from ideally dressed, wearing a white, lacy, free-flowing dress, but skilfully climbed onto Brathen's neck.

'Don't be ridiculous, sweetheart, you'll freeze to death up there,' cautioned Arawn.

'And you'll fall off,' fretted Larry.

'Don't worry, her neck is lovely and warm. If I do fall off, I'm sure Brathen will catch me... You will catch me, won't you Babe?'

Brathen did a short couple of grunts which hopefully meant, ‘*of course, I will.*’

Caron held on tightly to Brathen’s preened scales and instantly they were travelling through the air at an incredible speed. Caron suspected the ride would be like a bucking bronco, but it was surprisingly steady and manageable. She wanted to know why she hadn’t done this before. It was wonderful, she felt exhilarated. Admittedly, next time she would fasten her hair back and wear more sensible clothes, but even as she was, it was still an unmissable experience.

A few minutes later they arrived at the lookout post. It was deserted and looked as though it had been this way for many months. She climbed off Brathen’s neck and forced open the cabin door. Inside was a letter, propped up against the iced-up window. She was far too cold to open it up and read it there. She tucked it securely inside the top of her dress. An urgency now was to get back to the warm Kingdom before she froze to death. The return flight was not free from concern. Being so cold, Caron found it hard to hold on to Brathen’s polished scales. And then, just as they cleared the mountain peaks with the Kingdom below, she wobbled and then fell off Brathen’s neck. Larry, Arawn and several others screamed as they watched their Queen falling helplessly through the air, rapidly heading towards the hard, unforgiving ground. However, they needn’t have worried. Brathen swooped downwards and gently swaddled her talons around Caron’s slim waist. Now the Queen truly was flying. Queen Tegan caught sight of her sister from her bedroom window and was bitterly envious.

‘They’ve left a letter!’ shouted Queen Caron as Brathen gently lowered her to the ground. ‘Wow, that was something else!’

‘That was insanity, you mean,’ said a concerned Arawn.

Caron opened the letter. They all read together:

*“To the Marutuk Kingdom and all its people,*

*There have been events, most severe, which you need to be aware of. A deeply troubled war has been feigned between you and the people of the Netherworld. Cunning technical wizardry has deceptively convinced your enemy that they have been triumphant. All the dragons and all the Marutukians are assumed to have perished by weapons both cunning and disproportionate. So disproportionate that the frozen lands surrounding the Kingdom are assumed to be deadly poisonous to any human.*

*Therefore, the Kingdom is now freed from all scrutiny and surveillance.*

*However, the strictest isolation is now imposed.*

*As a consequence, the supplies arrangement is no longer operative.*

*God be with the people of Marutuk.*

*The Protectorate”*

‘Well, that explains what’s happened to our audience. I kinda miss them,’ said Larry.

So absorbed in the letter, no one happened to notice Queen Tegan angrily marching up towards them. She snatched the letter out of Caron's hand.

‘For the Queen’s eyes only, how dare you read it!’ she snapped.

‘You’re wrong, it’s addressed to all the people,’ said Queen Caron defensively.

But Queen Tegan ignored her, she was too busy reading the letter.

‘This is unacceptable, completely unacceptable! I need new clothes, new shoes and toiletries. Everyone here is stuck in the dark ages. They can’t even make soap properly!’ fumed Queen Tegan.

‘That’s completely unfair. With the limited resources available, I think our people do remarkably well,’ retorted Caron.

‘This is the last straw. I’m going back to my own world. I hate this place and hate these people,’ growled Tegan.

‘Does that include your husband and children?’ asked Arawn delicately.

‘Tegan, make sense. How are you going to get out of the Kingdom? No one’s going to help you,’ said Larry (her father).

‘Queen Tegan to you! I control the dragons. Brathen will take me!’ snapped Tegan.

‘Not if I can help it,’ said Queen Caron, under her breath.

Queen Tegan had said enough. She stormed away, back towards the castle

‘We really will have to find some way of getting the evil out of her,’ said Arawn solemnly.



# Chapter 10

## Recycling

Having easy access to Netherworld commodities, in hindsight, was probably a bad move. The Kingdom had become lazy and unproductive. It was time for a change. Every single item requested from the Netherworld was evaluated. Naturally, this was a job for Professor Deri. It was up to him to find substitutes and alternatives. Fortunately, he knew more-or-less everything.

Cement, which always seemed to take up a significant part of the import's basket, could be substituted for rice husks. A new initiative to grow more rice began. It was an easy crop to cultivate.

Soaps, shampoo and cleaning liquids, could all be made out of natural things like clay, egg yolks and coconut milk. Fragrances from certain flowers could be added. Clearly, a chemical research program was essential for a fully functioning Kingdom.

Fortunately, the Kingdom was self-sufficient when it came to food. The overuse of exotic spices was a recent extravagance and would have to stop.

It emerged that virtually everything previously imported, had a natural substitute readily found in the Kingdom except for one vital commodity – fabric. With fabric, the up-to-date kind, went luxury, glamour and fashion. Thanks to the Queens, this was something the Kingdom had become accustomed to: Lightweight sports clothing, stylish creations for special occasions, pretty little numbers, designer T-shirts, comfortable underwear and most importantly, sexy nightwear were always in high demand. This was where the Kingdom was going to become seriously unstuck. This was Professor Deri's biggest challenge. The Kingdom knew how to weave, but it was a very long process. They were proficient at knitting, but knitted clothes were quite itchy and cumbersome. A few people in the Kingdom could produce lace, but this was also a long laborious process. The women of the Kingdom especially, would not want to go back to hessian and serge. The Kingdom had no hope of making the sheerest of polyester fabrics or Egyptian cotton cloth. There was only one solution: recycling. It was the only way forward.

It turned out, rather embarrassingly, that Queen Caron alone, had

over three hundred outfits, barely worn once. Many people had clothes in their wardrobes that had become tired and not worn anymore. However, the most disturbing of all was that a high proportion of the landfill in the far corner of the Kingdom consisted of discarded clothes. With the convenience of cheap imports, old clothes were considered unrecyclable, but not anymore. All discarded clothes, unworn clothes and nearly all Queen Caron's clothes were recycled. They were cleaned, adjusted, altered, ironed, repaired or made into something new.

The Kingdom had learnt an important lesson: without easy, cheap imports, the throwaway society was eliminated.

The Kingdom was now alone, unaided and disregarded, just as it used to be, just as it should be. Most of the elders preferred it this way but the younger of the Kingdom had become used to having a link with the Netherworld. Books and magazines were more often than not, included in the imports. The younger ones had been made aware of the shortfalls in their somewhat sheltered lives. Now, with no imports arrangement, dissatisfaction was inevitable. All it would take was a spark to cause an uprising and who better to provide that spark than Queen Tegan.

With no access to the latest fashions, Queen Tegan decided to adopt the style of a Goth. Basically, she used a lot of black dye. She dyed her long blonde hair, black and used dark eye makeup and black lipstick. Her dresses were substantially shortened, and if not black already, were also dyed. Silver chains and studs were strategically placed and black boots were the preferred footwear. She really looked the part. Now, there was no problem in telling the identical twin sisters apart. Naturally, Gareth didn't approve and she frightened the twins. However, several of the younger Marutukians loved the style and did their best to copy her. To go with this new image, with her evilness, she was unruly, rude, bad-tempered and thoroughly mean. Not a very good example to set for anyone. However, evil Queen Tegan now had a following.

Slowly but surely, the Kingdom began to experience instances of undesirable behaviour: petty crime, theft, bullying, insolence and so on. For the first time in the Kingdom's history, there had to be a delinquent prevention program. A 'gentle' smack off their parents would have worked wonders, but the Kingdom now had self-declared 'psychoanalysts' who analysed things far too much. Of course, once parted from evil Queen Tegan's influence, they returned to being model citizens – as well as could be expected of adolescent teenagers.

The evil Goth Queen required assistance in her plan. Conveniently, there was no shortage of wayward teenagers who would willingly help her. She was desperate to leave the humdrum Kingdom and return to her much-preferred Netherworld. However, she wouldn't be returning as an ordinary person, but as a Queen with magical powers – and an attitude heavily tainted with evilness. Dragon Brathen would take her, she had to obey the Queen's demand. There was only one serious obstacle in her way, her twin sister.

Queen Caron had to be dealt with.

## Chapter 11

### Tegan's tantrum

Despite Queen Tegan's despicable deceitfulness, Queen Caron continued with her morning run. Fortunately, Arawn was now wise to Tegan's evil trickery. Besides, with dyed black hair, she could hardly fool her sister's husband anymore.

As usual, it was a beautiful morning. This particular morning, Queen Tegan discretely followed her. It was quite an effort to keep Caron in her sights as now, she was nowhere near as fit as her sister. As with any sensible runner, Caron always carried a bottle of water with her. Today, however, this would be her downfall. A young impressionable delinquent who Queen Tegan had taken under her wing, had put a strong sleeping draught in Caron's drink. All Queen Tegan had to do was wait until she swigged the water. This she did just before she reached the Woods-with-no-wood. It was so called because Queen Mererid's ashes had contaminated the ground with death and evil preventing anything from growing. Before that, it was simply known as the 'Woods'. This was where their grandpa, Java and his brother Rosh used to play, many, many years ago. Queen Caron sat on a rock and enjoyed the scenery while gulping her drink. A minute later, she was lying on the ground, fast asleep.

Queen Tegan had to act quickly. She had come prepared with several lengths of rope and a roll of Netherworld gaffa tape. She tied Caron's hands and feet together and stuck a large piece of tape across her mouth. Now, she had to find somewhere to hide her sister. Tegan remembered her grandpa telling her about a small cave somewhere in this particular area. All she had to do was find it. Fortunately for Tegan, but no one else, it happened to be fairly close by. Tegan placed her sister into the deepest, darkest part of the cave and placed several twigs and leaves over her.

The evil deed was done. Dragon Brathen would now take her out of the Kingdom without any hindrance from her sister. She put on her warmest coat and packed a few things in a backpack. Before she left her resplendent castle bedroom for the last time, she took the dragon bladder out of the specially made box and stabbed it with a sharp knife. As it was made out of a dragon's bladder, it took several

attempts to puncture it.

Dragon Brathen landed heavily in the town square. Clearly, she was not best pleased. The town's folk gathered – this was not an everyday occurrence. Queen Tegan, as well as being possessed by evil, was a determined woman. She marched up to Brathen, ignoring the crowds that were now congregating in large numbers. Dragon Brathen bowed her head down to her mistress.

‘Dragon, take me back to my home in the Netherworld,’ she said quietly, but sternly.

It was extremely doubtful if Brathen knew where her home was. Dragons only have a limited amount of intelligence, but Brathen knew enough to know that it was an awfully long way away. However, right from the beginning when a man named Marutuk, stole the magical horn from King Debrux, his descendants had complete control over the dragons. Brathen had no choice but to obey her, although, extremely begrudgingly. She stamped her legs on the ground causing minor earth tremors. She snorted a flame or two out of her nostrils, incinerating a couple of bench seats. Then she made such a shrill, complaining sort of noise, that it shattered several window panes.

Queen Tegan's mother, Jennifer, heard the commotion. She ran as fast as she could over to Tegan and dragon Brathen.

‘What are you doing?’ her mother asked, tentatively and out of breath.

‘Doing? I'm going home, my proper home. Away from this excuse for a life!’ Queen Tegan boomed.

‘You can't. You can't leave the twins... and your husband... and the Kingdom!’ panicked Jennifer.

‘I am a Queen. I can do what I like!’ snapped Tegan.

By now, just about everyone was in the town square including Larry – her father, Gareth – her husband with the twins, Arawn and Professor Deri. However, one person was missing which wasn't immediately apparent.

‘Tegan, you are possessed by evil, you are not thinking straight. This is not the right thing to do,’ fretted Gareth.

‘He's right. You were contaminated with Queen Mererid's ashes. Try and reach into your soul and find your true self,’ implored Larry.

‘Nonsense! Anyway, it's too late, I'm going... I'm going to leave my mark on the Netherworld,’ said Queen Tegan with a certain amount of

ambivalence.

It was too late. Tegan had already mounted Brathen's scaly neck and was telepathically giving her instructions.

Once again, Brathen severely protested at Tegan's command. The dragon stamped the ground and squealed in such a way as to painfully grate the inner ear. However, without another voice in her head to countermand the order, Queen, Brathen had no choice but to obey her. Another voice in her head was unlikely as Queen Caron was unconscious and tied up, deep inside a remote, damp, dark cave.

Very reluctantly, dragon Bethan flapped her wings and lurched from the ground. She had no choice in the matter, but it was going to be a very rough ride for the evil Queen.

'Quick, we need Caron! Has anyone seen Queen Caron?' panicked Jennifer.

Worryingly, no one had seen her.

'Did anyone see her go for her run this morning?' asked Larry.

The town's people were too occupied, watching their precious royal dragon distancing herself from the Kingdom.

'Has anyone seen Queen Caron today?' asked Larry much louder this time.

Everyone thought about it for a few seconds and then shook their heads.

'No, but I saw Queen Tegan early this morning. She was acting very suspiciously,' said someone in the crowd.

'I have a very bad feeling about this,' said Arawn.

'We have to search every inch of the Kingdom, and quickly,' fretted Jennifer.

## Chapter 12

### Tasty Japanese tourists

*Radar reconnaissance NRO Washington DC.*

It was a job someone had to do – monitor the skies over a part of the USA. It was a tedious, soul-destroying job which tended to cause severe eye strain, double vision and headaches. However, for officers Bill and Bob, this particular day was unusual.

‘What the hell is that?’ sparked Bill, pointing at his radar screen.

‘Hmm, the trace looks very odd,’ said Bob.

‘Whatever it is, it’s moving in the lower atmosphere at around 200 mph, northwards.’

‘Any experimental aircraft in that area?’

‘Just checking... no, just commercial.’

‘Perhaps, this time it’s the real thing?’

‘What, a UFO?’

‘Only one way to find out, get on to control...’

Twenty minutes later, two F 18 hornet fighter jets were in the skies, tracking the unidentified flying object.

*‘This is Oscar eight, you’re not going to believe this,’* said the pilot over the intercom.

‘Try me Oscar eight?’

*‘We have in our sights... what looks exactly like a dragon, Sir.’*

‘OK Oscar eight, quit fooling around, April the first was yesterday,’

*‘No really, a friggin dragon!’*

The military chiefs were not best pleased. Despite the hugely expensive charade of fooling the general public that the dragons had been wiped out, there was now one travelling over USA air space.

‘Any distinguishing features?’

*‘Yes, lots, it’s a dragon! Oh, and I’m not making this up, there appears to be a woman on its neck, and, she looks like a witch!’*

‘OK, follow it.’

*‘We could shoot it down, Sir?’*

‘Absolutely not!’

*‘It’s over the Sierra Madre mountains, just left Mexico. It’s in our jurisdiction. Why not, we killed all the other dragons?’*

‘Oscar eight, there’s something you need to be briefed on. Report to your supervisor immediately when you land.’

It was a fact that only a few people, mainly high-ranking officials, a building full of technicians, engineers, a film crew and the Protectorate knew about: The destruction of the dragons was faked at great expense to the American taxpayer. Despite the trouble the Netherworld had gone to in sparing the dragons and leaving the Kingdom in peace, there was now a rogue dragon at large – with a Marutukian sitting on its neck. This was annoying, to say the least. To add to the irritation, it was heading directly towards a highly-populated area of North America.

Conveniently, the special spider silk nets and the freeze guns were not faked, they really had been made. Where ever the dragon was heading for, they had to be ready and prepared. A loose dragon was something highly undesirable, and incompatible in the twenty-first-century Netherworld.

Dragon Brathen was seriously tired. For over thirty hours, she had been in the sky, carrying her evil passenger. She desperately wanted to touch down, have a rest and eat a few humans, but Queen Tegan was cruel to the end. Miraculously, the Queen had managed to get a few hours' sleep without falling off, but even she was not without serious discomfort. She had the foresight to pack a few sandwiches and watery fruits, but she hadn't accounted for the severe cold, despite being huddled around Brathen's warm neck.

Five hours later, Tegan's destination came into view, at least, she thought it was her destination – Vancouver. However, she happened to be out by a mere thousand miles. Los Angeles was approaching fast. She never remembered her home city being so vast. For miles, they flew over the top of hundreds of office blocks, department stores, and highways. Finally, Queen Tegan gave the command,

‘Land there!’

The extremely tired dragon was hardly going to argue. She nosedived



for an open park – which happened to be MacArthur Park in the centre of the city. For hundreds of people to see a real living dragon landing in the heart of their city was quite simply, mind-blowing. Brathen was truly magnificent. No other creature roamed the planet quite like a dragon. The terrifying, intimidating, foreboding attributes were only ever skin deep. Brathen was as faithful as a border collie and gentle as a kitten. However, she was hungry, very hungry indeed.

In the nick of time, a large van pulled up next to the dragon and hastily unloaded its cargo of cow carcasses. Brathen was already licking his lips at the sight of several Japanese tourists clicking away with their cameras. That was Brathen sorted out for the moment, now it was Queen Tegan's turn to become threatening. Cow carcasses certainly wouldn't pacify her needs.

'I am Queen Tegan of Marutuk, where is the nearest MacDonald's?' her booming voice was quite intense for such a slight female.

A few close-by onlookers nervously pointed in a certain direction, but now, two policemen were on the scene. They had no intention of letting her go anywhere other than some holding cell while they checked her passport or visa. Unfortunately, the two brave officers were not prepared for Queen Tegan's magical abilities. Some kind of lightning bolts shot from her finger-ends in the direction of the unsuspecting officers. Unfortunately for Tegan, their guns were already out of their holsters and fired, moments before their uniforms burst into flames. Two bullets were now painfully embedded in her chest.

The Queen dropped to the floor in agony. Never before had she experienced pain quite like it. The pain caused a moment of sanity – a moment detached from her evilness. The realisation that she was completely on her own, away from her loved ones, was almost unbearable – even more painful than the bullets. Yes, she did have loved ones back home, although their warmth had waned considerably since she became possessed. Then she momentarily thought of her beautiful twin boys, how she had neglected them and not loved them. Her eyes flooded with tears.

To add to her turmoil, what happened next was utterly shameful. Disregarding the Queen's critical condition, a scruffy opportunity seeker, someone clearly void of any compassion, ran up to her and attempted to snatch her bag. Being a Queen of a dragon realm, he suspected that there would be untold valuables within. Tegan realised what was happening and with all her remaining strength, managed to grab hold of his arm. She just needed to hold on for a couple of seconds, that's all it would take. Suddenly an eerie, black fog oozed

out of Tegan's body and into the body of the would-be thief.

At last, she was free of the evilness, but not the bullet wounds or the regret – or the loneliness. The thief probably didn't notice an awful lot of difference, but if he wasn't completely evil before, he was now.

Dragon Brathen began to snort loudly and fretfully. As much as Brathen disapproved of this particular Queen, she was there to protect her and stand by her. Brathen's flaming breath began in vengeance. Cars were set alight along with trees, bushes and anything else that would burn.

However, the military was on the ball and prepared. The distinctive noise of a powerful helicopter began to rattle the high-rise buildings. Low and dangerously, it weaved its way above the streets until it was directly over the dragon. This time it was for real, no drill, no GCI, no green screen. The men on board were America's finest – brave and professional. They knew that just one targeted flame from the dragon's nostrils would destroy the helicopter in an instant. The special net was ready and unfurled. It had to be dropped directly over the dragon. By now, the press and media were on the scene, fully televising the event. The pilot and his crew had to get it right, there wouldn't be a second chance. The net dropped from the belly of the machine. It was aimed perfectly and completely covered Brathen. A control cord tightened the net around Brathen. She bleated, roared and jostled, but it was all pointless, she was well and truly snared. She was so confined that she couldn't even breathe her fire. Queen Tegan watched with horror and helplessness. There was nothing she could do – she was dying. What had she done? How could she have allowed evilness to cloud her judgement to this degree? She'd endangered Brathen, endangered herself and in doing so, endangered the Kingdom.

A robust, low loader was waiting close by, along with a mobile crane. It was like a perfectly choreographed dance. Both thundering vehicles pulled up alongside the dragon. The crane's hook engaged the net and the jib took the strain. The powerful engine strained as it took the significant weight of a mature dragon. Brathen clearly suffered tremendous discomfort as the net tried to reshape her into a large ball. Moments later the crane had successfully deposited the defenceless load onto the low loader trailer. The many huge tyres squashed into the tarmac. After the net was secured down, the menacing vehicle engaged a gear and slowly pulled away. This horrendous experience was something Brathen would never forget.

A nearby ambulance had been waiting patiently and could now attend to Queen Tegan. Undoubtedly, she was on death's door, lying in her own pool of blood. There wasn't much time, the medics had to act

fast. As soon as the bleeding had stemmed, she was whisked away – presumably, to a nearby hospital.

If anyone cared to stay around the spot where Tegan had lay dying, they may have seen a misfortune of a different sort. As night fell and after the people had dispersed, another creature was drawn to the spot. Out of the sewers and from the shadows, vermin of every shape and size congregated on the pool of queen's blood. For a while, it was succulent and sweet, but then it began.

It is important to know that the blood of the Kingdom's rulers has very unusual properties. More often than not, beneficial but when ingested, the effects are profound. At first, flames projected out of every orifice of the furry dirty grey creatures and then, minutes later, all that remained was a pile of ashes. The sound of a screaming rat is rarely heard but this night, a new sound filled the sleepy streets.

# Chapter 13

## Deri the Sleuth

The Kingdom was facing grave times – again. One of the Queens was close to death, somewhere in North America and the other Queen was probably also close to death, somewhere in the Kingdom. An all-out search was on to find Queen Caron. Almost every inch of the Kingdom was searched including the dungeons and attics of every single dwelling. People were lowered down the Kingdom’s wells and the man-made sea was completely dredged. People were distraught, not to mention her mother, father and husband. Queen Caron really was adored by the people – as was Queen Tegan before she became evil. The people were also fully aware that without the Queens, the dragons couldn’t be controlled and the Kingdom would face a very grim future. Many people were angry that Queen Mererid’s ashes were not disposed of properly, after all, that’s what triggered the troubles. At the very least, there should have been warning signs and the area fenced off but no one was brave enough to do the job.

Someone suggested that Queen Caron may be somewhere high up in the mountains. A massive search began involving treacherous climbing, but somehow, they knew it was all in vain. They had to go back to the drawing board, think logically and use a bit of common sense. Who better than Professor Deri to follow through with this line of thought?

Larry brought Professor Deri up to speed with the exploits of a well-known Netherworld sleuth, Sherlock Holmes. He told Deri how he found subtle clues to solve mysteries. Actually, he’d never read any of the stories and the only title he could think of was “The hounds of the Baskervilles”. All he could remember, for certain, was that he wore a deerstalker hat and smoked a clay pipe. Naturally, Deri had to play the part to the full with the unusual hat and pipe. Somebody had the irritating task of making them.

It called for a meeting. All the royal family members and Professor Deri convened in the local tavern.

‘Right, what do we know? When was Queen Caron last seen?’ asked Deri, heavily drawing fresh air through his clay pipe.

‘I saw her in the morning, getting ready for her run,’ said Arawn.

‘So, let’s assume she went for her run as usual. Queen Tegan was also seen early that morning, so let’s assume that she followed her, for sinister purposes. If this is correct, I can only assume that Queen Caron is somewhere on the route she took,’ said Professor Deri intelligently.

Everything the Professor said made obvious sense, but it didn’t make anyone feel any better.

‘That’s far too many *assumes*. We have to retrace every part of her route, but we don’t actually know what exact route she took,’ said Arawn despondently.

‘No, we don’t, well not every part of it. However, I *do* have a confession from a certain reformed delinquent. She’s admitted putting a sleeping draught in Queen Caron’s water bottle,’ said the Professor.

‘Who? I’ll throttle her!’ snapped Arawn.

‘That won’t help. Evil can be very manipulative and anyway, she’s very remorseful,’ defended the Professor.

‘There’s a lot we can deduce from her spare running shoes and her spare running clothes. We also have to know how long she ran for and what average speed,’ continued the Professor.

‘She left exactly as the town clock chimed six, but I was always on parade when she came back,’ said Arawn.

‘I saw her return most mornings when I went for milk at around seven,’ said Larry.

‘Very good. So, Caron being an experienced runner, she would run at an average speed of around eight miles in an hour. Allowing for breaks, say five minutes, I would estimate her route would be around seven miles,’ said the Professor, without the aid of a calculator.

‘That could take her as far as the rice fields to the south, Dapple brook to the west, the Pine Forest to the east or Apple orchard to the north,’ said Larry, showing off his geography skills.

‘Apple orchard? Doesn’t that take you past the Woods with-no-wood?’ asked Deri.

Of course, if anyone had stopped to think for a moment, they would have arrived at this point many hours ago. Instead of chasing their tails and searching in complete disarray, they would have realised that the Woods-with-no- wood was where Queen Mererid’s ashes were. It was where Queen Tegan became possessed with evil when both the Queens went for a run. It was an obvious place for Queen Tegan to hide her sister.

‘Er, please tell me someone has searched that area?’ asked Jennifer, tentatively.

‘It’s a place that’s avoided because of the evil ashes, so probably not,’ said Arawn.

‘I’m afraid the people of this land are very superstitious, but as Queen Tegan absorbed the evil, it will be quite safe there now,’ said Deri.

An hour later, all four convened at the Woods-with-no-wood. Arawn had run ahead and was already frantically searching the area to no avail.

‘A thought has just popped into my mind. Isn’t this where Java and his brother used to play as children?’ suggested Larry.

‘Yes, and, more to the point, I seem to remember Dad mentioning a cave around here!’ exclaimed Jennifer.

Despite being hidden by shrubs and branches, the cave was quickly found. To their relief, deep inside, in the darkest corner, they found Queen Tegan. She was cold, dehydrated and unconscious and barely breathing. The bindings were tied so tight that her hands and feet were blue. For four days, she had been in the cave with mice and rats around her toes. Her screams could not permeate the gaffa tape across her mouth, not that anyone would have heard them, so far from the Kingdom. It was doubtful if she would have lasted another day. Once out in the warmth of the sunshine, with the bindings and tape removed, she began to surface from her awful, terrifying ordeal. Arawn held her, kissed her forehead and slowly dripped water into her parched mouth. Fortunately, before the ordeal, she was at the peak of health. Fifteen minutes later, she had all but recovered, such is the constitution of a Marutukian Queen. Jennifer, her mother, had the foresight to bring sandwiches, not that they were particularly intended for Caron. However, she devoured them and then stood on her feet.

‘Is anyone jogging back with me?’ said Caron, sprightly.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I’m carrying you back and that’s the end of it!’ bawled Arawn, assertively.

A moment of silence passed. Caron was hardly in any fit state for bad news, but it fell on her father to bring her up to speed with recent goings-on.

‘Caron, sweetheart, there’s something you need to know. Your sister has left the Kingdom with Brathen,’ said Larry.

‘What? For how long? When’s she due back?’ screeched Caron.

‘I don’t think she’s coming back. She’s been gone for almost as long as

you've been here. Four days now.'

'We have to go and find her... and bring her back!' implored Caron.

It was the logical thing to do, but there was a serious hurdle to their intentions. Leaving the Kingdom had always been a problem. There were only two ways: A long trek over the perilous mountains or through the toxic, perilous sewage tunnel. Realistically, the mountain route could only be achieved with the help of a dragon. However, dragon travel was definitely the last resort. Taking you to the top of the mountains was tolerated, but the rest of the way to civilisation was out of the question, especially for an inexperienced dragon. For a start, despite breathing flames, dragons absolutely hated the cold. It was totally inappropriate and unreasonable to ask a dragon to take you any further than the mountain ridge. In her defence, Queen Tegan was possessed by evil, dispelling any respect or consideration for Brathen. If they resorted to dragon transport to the mountain ridge, after that, there was a ten-mile hike, through inhospitable, frozen terrain before reaching Netherworld civilisation.

Through the sewage tunnel was, by far, the shortest and warmest route. However, from beginning to end, it was full of terrifying creatures, all wanting to eat you. It was the route that King Java, Jennifer, Larry and a guide called Lloyd used successfully many decades ago. However, they only succeeded through a tremendous amount of luck and bravery.

In other words, there was no real way out of the Kingdom – unless that is, you happened to have a hot air balloon.

'We will have to make a hot air balloon,' proclaimed Professor Deri.

'How long will that take!?' shrieked Queen Caron.

'A week if we all work together. We still have the mechanisms and gas bottles from Wurtherly's invasion,' said Deri.

'That was over twenty years ago. Who's to say the burners will still work?' panicked Larry.

'Trust me, I'm a professor!'

And so, the construction of a hot air balloon began.

## **Chapter 14**

### **Brathen's new home**

A special dragon-sized enclosure was constructed in record time – one day. As heartless as they were towards the unwelcomed beast, they knew they couldn't keep it constrained in the net for too long. A damaged dragon was no good to anyone. A fully functioning, fire-breathing dragon, on the other hand, was worth a king's ransom.

San Diego Zoo, won the tender to provide a home for dragon Brathen – a reasonable 10 million dollars – It was high time the government clawed back some money. Fake wars were certainly not cheap. However, the zoo owners were confident that they would get a healthy return on their investment in the first twelve months. A prize exhibit like a fire-breathing dragon was certain to increase the visitors' numbers.

Queen Tegan was in a hospital bed in a high dependency ward. The doctors and surgeons had stabilised her life signs, but there was nothing else they could do – she was dying. After three days of floating in and out of consciousness, two austere-looking people visited her. The Queen had no idea who they were, but they knew exactly who she was. They quickly concluded that this was unacceptable, she couldn't possibly be allowed to die. However, they knew there was only one person in the whole world who could save her.

It would be unprecedented and contravene all protocols, but a visit to the Kingdom was necessary.



## Chapter 15

### Not enough rope

Finding a suitable material to make the hot air balloon was proving difficult. Rayon, nylon or polyester would have been ideal, but there was no means of making such hi-tech fabrics in a relatively primitive Kingdom. The best they had was cotton bed sheets – they simply had to do. Two hundred bed sheets were donated, which meant an uncomfortable night's sleep for many in the Kingdom. They were all sewn neatly together in the shape of a balloon. The basket was beautifully woven from some sturdy reeds found growing near the man-made sea. Finally, the basket was fastened to the balloon with the thickest ropes available. It was now time to test things out. Fortunately, the burners still worked and there was an ample supply of butane gas. The balloon began to inflate, all was going well. Eventually, there was the expected balloon shape and it was on the brink of lifting the basket off the ground. A crowd had gathered to see the event, mainly to see what had become of their bedsheets.

‘A bit more on the burners!’ shouted the Professor.

It all happened very quickly – surprisingly quickly. As soon as a small patch of cotton set alight, the rest followed. Two hundred bed sheets burnt with such fervour that it warmed the Kingdom a degree or so. It was quite a spectacle but the crowd seemed to have expected it. Never before had the phrase ‘back to the drawing board’ so much relevance.

Another two hundred bed sheets were donated. Now it was going to be an uncomfortable night's sleep for more or less everyone in the Kingdom. Professor Deri had to experiment. He soaked the patches of cotton in many solutions and allowed them to dry. Only one refused to burn, it was soaked in a particular salt that they used to clean clothes. It was actually Borax, but no one knew that. And so, another balloon was sewn together. All this took time. It was now two weeks since Queen Tegan had left the Kingdom. Test day came again. This time, it appeared that the Professor had solved the problem. The balloon inflated perfectly and tugged firmly at the tethered basket.

There was no time like the present. The wind strength and direction were ideal. The four brave souls to make the perilous journey were: Queen Caron, Arawn, Gareth and Larry. The Professor dearly wanted

to go, but his genius would be invaluable in the Queen-less Kingdom. Jennifer also wanted to go, but someone had to look after the twins. The supplies were packed into the basket, then the four brave souls climbed in.

The tethering ropes were cut and immediately, the balloon began to rise. There were many mixed emotions. The Professor was very pleased with himself. He had actually built a flying machine, but few shared his enthusiasm. There was no doubt that it was going to be a perilous journey with an uncertain outcome. Would the brave four ever be seen again? In particular, would their Queen ever be seen again? Then it would be a Kingdom completely without a sovereign. Even one was better than none. Minutes later the balloon had achieved enough height to clear the mountain peaks and about to head towards the Netherworld. Everyone was waving and cheering, but neither could see each other, it was just the right thing to do.

Then suddenly, there was a loud tearing noise, and then another, and then another. The basket lurched to a precarious angle. The four passengers held on for dear life. They had to reduce height and quickly. As it happened, this wasn't an issue as the balloon was already out of control and plummeting towards the ground. The Professor suddenly switched from delight to despair, but he didn't let the crisis affect his professionalism.

'Hmm, perhaps I should have used more rope,' he muttered under his breath.

His second attempt had catastrophically failed and four people looked very much as though they were about to meet their maker. Then, as if things couldn't get any worse, there was another loud tearing noise. The basket suddenly detached itself from the balloon completely and began to fall at terminal velocity. The bed-sheet balloon did the opposite and lurched upwards, towards the clouds. A dragon or two could have possibly saved them, but they needed a command from their leader, Brathen. Unfortunately, she was in San Diego Zoo. There was only one chance, one slim chance of survival.

Incidentally, at that brief moment in time, totally unrelated, another hot air balloon appeared over the mountains on the opposite side of the Kingdom. This particular balloon was working perfectly and not made from bed sheets.

Sometimes, fate runs a course of events which, from an obscure beginning, ends in a significant happenstance. Constructing a sea in the Kingdom, complete with sandy beach and waves, may at the time have seemed a little extravagant – a touch outlandish. However, at

this moment in time, a severed balloon basket containing four very important people was plunging towards this extravagance. Perhaps it was fortuitous, perhaps not, it all depended on how hard the basket would hit the water – and then if the occupants could swim.

Even though the basket was dropping out of the sky like a stone, to the four passengers, it still offered some kind of protection. However, they knew this was all in their minds, they had to jump out. Moments later, there were five enormous splashes in the sea, one much larger than the other four.

The forgiving water had saved their lives. All four surfaced, coughing and spluttering. Even the basket surfaced with vigour. Larry painfully bellyflopped on the water, but other than that, everyone was fine apart from being wet and shaken.

They swam to the shore to be greeted by an old friend.

## Chapter 16

### Lloyd and a companion

The *other* hot air balloon, made of high-tech materials and much stronger nylon ropes, was now securely tethered and at rest on the nearby, sandy beach. It had brought two people into the Kingdom. One of them was instantly recognised.

‘Uncle Lloyd!’ screamed Queen Caron, as she ran towards him.

She gave him a huge hug and then realised that she was dripping wet.

The familiar, friendly face took Larry’s mind off the lingering sting from his bellyflop. He also decided to give Lloyd a man hug. Lloyd was now soaked to the skin from hugs, but he didn’t complain.

‘What brings you here, old man?’ asked Larry.

‘Larry, we’re being rude, Lloyd has a companion,’ interrupted Jennifer.

In truth, even though he was dripping wet, Jennifer was irritated that her husband hadn’t hugged her first – he did nearly die.

She was correct, Lloyd hadn’t come alone. A young attractive woman with long auburn hair draped over her slim physique, had accompanied him.

‘Hello, I’m Gwenda from the Protectorate,’ she said calmly.

‘Has Chandrella sent you?’ asked Gareth, who had now joined the collection of dripping wet people.

‘My mother died, last year. The role of head Protectorate now falls on my shoulders.’

‘Sorry to hear that, but you *are* here on instructions from the Protectorate,’ suggested Jennifer.

‘Yes, there’s no time to lose. Dragon Brathen has been snared and is now caged up in San Diego Zoo near California. Queen Tegan is close to death in the Los Angeles County hospital. Only you, Queen Caron, can save her. Incidentally, she is now free from her evilness. We need to go, now, in the balloon. I don’t know how long the weather conditions will stay like this.’

‘Surely, I can dry off and change my clothes first?’ chuntered Larry.

‘Yes, you can, you’re not going. The balloon will only take four. Lloyd has decided to make the Kingdom his home. I’m returning with Queen Caron, Arawn and Gareth,’ said Gwenda.

‘Lloyd, what about your wife, Eileen?’ inquired Jennifer.

‘She died three years ago. Nothing in the Netherworld for me now,’ said Lloyd despondently.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Jennifer.

‘Yes, sorry mate, but I have to go... to find my daughter!’ agued Larry.

‘Darling, accept it, you’re not as young as you used to be. Besides, the Kingdom needs you, I need you,’ pleaded Jennifer.

That was enough. It was time for the overdue hug.

‘You’re probably right. Apparently, we’re desperately short of bedsheets. I have to show the Professor how to construct a loom,’ said Larry, trying to make light of the situation.

It was farewell time again. Hopefully, with a modern hot air balloon, there would be no embarrassment on this occasion. Professor Deri couldn’t tear himself away from the Netherworld balloon. He was fascinated with the modern technology and the high-tech materials. He could see exactly where he’d gone wrong with his design, although it still boiled down to not having enough ropes.

The tethering lines were released and then the burners flared. Copious amounts of hot air filled the balloon, lifting the basket off the ground and whisking it towards the clouds. It wasn’t long before the passengers were over the mountain tops and out of sight.

The Kingdom now had to try and return to normal – without bedsheets, but even worse, without the Queens. It was as though a black cloud was shrouding the Kingdom – as though the Kingdom had lost its soul. However, life had to go on as best as it could.

The Professor now had another challenge: the well-being of the Kingdom. Controlling the dragons was always a vital requirement for the survival of the Kingdom. The heat from the flames of the dragon’s breath regulated the temperature of the Kingdom. The dragons effectively kept the Kingdom a warm and pleasant place to live. Without the dragons for too long, the Kingdom would return to another ice age.

Fortunately, there was a contingency plan for a lack of queens. They had had the foresight to fill two bellows with their breath. In the

event of the queens' absence, the bellows could be used as an alternative to their lungs and be used to blow the magical horn to summons the dragons. Unfortunately, with her evilness, Queen Tegan had slashed her bellows with a knife. However, her bellows hadn't deflated, just lost its tautness. There was a good chance that there was still plenty of Queen Tegan's breath remaining inside. Professor Deli instructed his engineering team to carefully patch up Tegan's bellows while being careful not to displace any more precious air.

After five days, there was definitely a slight chill in the air. It was time to try out the Professor's pipes. As usual, whenever the magic horn was blown, it was a big occasion. For the first time, the Professor understood the importance of crossing his fingers. His previous enterprises hadn't proved particularly successful, he hoped he could now redeem himself.

Both bellows were gently squeezed four times. The horn responded with four ear-grating blasts but absolutely nothing happened. Not a single dragon stirred, not the slightest murmur. Again, the bellows were squeezed, still, nothing happened. An eerie silence reverberated around the Kingdom. Clearly, the air inside the bellows was contaminated with the outside air. Crossing his fingers hadn't worked in the slightest. Once more, the Professor was frustrated with failure. Everyone groaned, despondently. All the Kingdom's people could do now was root out their woolly jumpers and pray that the Queens would soon return.

Realistically, it could be a while.

## Chapter 17

### A delight for Arawn

On the positive side, Gwenda had thoughtfully brought three warm coats for her passengers, but everything else was definitely on the negative side. Once away from the Kingdom, the harsh freezing air hit hard and painfully. The wind chill factor froze their tears, their lips and their eyelids shut. Arawn, especially, had never experienced such discomfort and such wrath from nature. The wind direction held true, keeping the balloon on course, but it would be hours before they reached civilisation. All told, it was a very long journey and this was just the beginning. All the passengers, including Gwenda, huddled together, shivering in the corner of the basket. It was hardly wind-tight, being made of wicker, but they all accepted that there must be a very good reason why it was made out of such an inadequate material. The frozen capped mountains seemed to go on forever. Far below, only the hardiest of living creatures could possibly survive.

Eventually, after two hours, the snow caps gave out to shale and a scattering of pine trees. Then a while later, a road, clearly a highway, passed beneath them. Another hour and a town appeared in the distance. This was convenient as the butane gas for the burners was running dangerously low.

At best, it was going to be a bumpy landing. A fast-food restaurant was closing in fast. It looked as though they were going to clout the big yellow 'M' sign with the basket. Fortunately, they just missed it, diving down onto a large, almost empty car park. The tarmac was unforgiving as the basket dragged along its abrasive surface. Finally, the balloon gave up the struggle and let the basket come to a standstill. All four jumped out, unharmed and hastily bundled the deflated balloon material into the basket.

'Come on Arawn, you'll enjoy this. One of the many delights of the Netherworld,' said Gareth warmly, putting his arm across his shoulders.

Arawn was the only one who hadn't experienced the pleasures of a quarter-pounder, French fries and a strawberry milkshake. He was in for a treat and best of all, Gwenda was paying.

'Well, what do you think?' asked Queen Caron.

‘It’s OK,’ he said enthusiastically, ‘but I don’t care for the green slimy thing.’

‘The gherkin? Oh, you get used to that,’ said Gareth.

All four munched their way through their meal. They all liked the new curry dip for the fries. The staff were oblivious to the fact that they were all strangely dressed and had recently climbed out of a hot air balloon, now parked untidily on the car park. They were far more concerned about whether or not they would recycle their waste in the correct containers.

‘This place used to be a truck stop,’ said Gwenda.

‘Really,’ said Queen Caron indifferently.

‘Actually, quite a significant truck stop. This is where your grandpa, King Java stopped for a meal, sixty-one years ago,’ explained Gwenda.

‘You’re kidding. Yes, I remember. He dropped that man’s ID card and then they arrested him,’ chirped Queen Caron.

‘Correct. Your grandpa didn’t have the luxury of a hot air balloon, he walked most of the way to get here.’

‘Yes, I know, apart from the lift in a lorry... So, nearby is where Grandpa met Grandma’

‘Quite possibly. Anyway, there is something very important I have to tell you. The situation is even graver than you could possibly imagine,’ feared Gwenda.

‘How can it be graver than Brathen in a cage and my sister on her death bed?’ scowled Caron.

‘Brathen is fertile, her egg is due any time now. That’s one of the main reasons why she was particularly reluctant to do the journey. If she lays her egg in the zoo, well, it will be no less than catastrophic. With today’s technology: DNA sequencing and so on, scientists will have the means to harvest many more dragons. A creature that sweats liquid gold and has pure diamonds the size of plums, for eyes... it doesn’t bear thinking about. These are very grave times,’ said Gwenda despondently.

‘Dragons will be exploited to the level of obscenity,’ fretted Gareth.

‘Correct. You must get to Brathen before she lays her egg.’

‘No urgency then!’ giped Arawn. ‘Have I got time to try one of these round cakes with holes in the middle?’

‘Our flight to Los Angeles leaves in just over an hour and the airport is



eighty miles away. Does that answer your question?’ explained Gwenda, while ringing for a taxi.

The balloon had to be left on the car park. Gwenda asked the restaurant manager to put some cones around it and assured him that it would be collected sometime in the next few weeks. He was already considering what he could get for it on eBay.

The taxi driver was offered treble fare if he would break all the speed limits and get them to the airport in record time. Naturally, he took on the challenge. Gareth lost the bet and had to sit in the front, inches away from a man who had obviously become nose blind to his pungent body odour and bad breath. It was still pretty unpleasant in the back, but at least both side windows were open.

‘Incidentally, Gareth and Queen Caron, have you brought your passports?’ asked Gwenda.

The air went quiet – deadly quiet. All that broke the silence was a rumble from the driver’s stomach.

‘Er, no, we haven’t. Never crossed our minds,’ said Queen Caron sheepishly.

‘To be honest, I wouldn’t know where to look for it. Never thought I’d ever need it again,’ said Gareth.

‘Likewise,’ said Caron.

‘A good job I’ve thought of everything then, isn’t it?’ said Gwenda.

Gwenda handed out the passports and flight tickets. Arawn had never seen a passport before. It all seemed very strange to him, that a little paper book was needed to travel about in this Netherworld. No one dared to ask the question, how had she managed to acquire three passports, complete with lifelike photos within? Apparently, the Protectorate was far above the law in every respect.

With fifteen minutes to spare, the taxi pulled up outside the departures entrance. Gwenda heavily tipped the driver and then told him to buy some toothpaste and soap with it.

## Chapter 18

### Sleeping beauty

‘Well, sweetheart, what do you think of the Netherworld air travel?’ asked Queen Caron.

‘Not a lot. Crammed inside a stuffy metal tube with those whining devil machines on the wings? Very disagreeable. Give me a dragon to travel on, any day,’ concluded Arawn.

Gareth and Gwenda were amused with Arawn’s response but said nothing. After all, Arawn was quite accurate with his observations. Unfortunately, the torture wasn’t quite over yet. If squeezed together like sardines in a can for seven hours wasn’t bad enough, they now spent an age, queuing through a never-ending sheep pen.

‘What’s all this about?’ groaned Arawn.

‘We have to show our passports, these little books. Then when that’s done, we have to go through something called customs. They have to make sure we’re not smuggling anything into their country,’ explained Gwenda.

‘Like what, for instance?’

‘Drugs, weapons, all sorts of things,’ said Gwenda.

‘They won’t class my knife as a weapon, will they?’ asked Arawn, innocently.

*Los Angeles airport security and camera surveillance.*

A phone call was made.

‘You wanted to know if we got a face match.’

*‘I take it you have... Where?’*

‘LAX. Just passed through passport control. What do you want us to do?’

*‘Delay her, we need her tailed.’*

\*

A while later, after discretely depositing a hunting knife in a litter bin, they were queuing again towards custom control. Surprisingly enough, they let Arawn through, along with Gareth and Gwenda, but Queen Caron was not so lucky.

‘If you could just step this way, please Madam,’ said a customs officer.

Twenty minutes later, Caron was reunited with her team in the departure lounge.

‘What was all that about?’ asked Gareth.

‘Don’t know, they didn’t search me or anything, they just kept me waiting in a room,’ said Queen Caron.

‘It’s given them time to put a tail on you,’ said Gwenda solemnly.

‘Tail? You mean, followed? Why would they want to do that?!’ panicked Queen Caron.

‘I was partly expecting it. They’ve been waiting for us – waiting for you to show up. They know far more than you think. They know that Tegan has a twin sister who can probably save her, and they know that the Kingdom will probably make an attempt to rescue Brathen.’

‘Who’s they?’ asked Caron.

‘Basically, an undisclosed government department. Many agreements were made between the Protectorate and the department of defence, but the unexpected appearance of a Kingdom Queen and a dragon have somewhat destabilised things.’

Gwenda reached into her holdall and pulled out a wad of notes and presented them to Queen Caron.

‘Ten thousand dollars – should be enough for every eventuality. Beware of muggers and pickpockets, you’d be shocked at what certain

people around here will do for that amount of money. This is where I have to part company,' said Gwenda.

'You what!? You can't leave us now, we need you!' snapped Gareth.

'That's nice to know, but I'm afraid that the Protectorate has to appear impartial. We can't be seen getting too involved in your affairs. I've helped you all I can, now you're on your own. We will be watching you though. Members of the Protectorate are widely dispersed.'

'Will we see you again?' asked Queen Caron.

'Who can say? Ideally, not. Your priority is to get to Queen Tegan without delay. A taxi outside will take you directly there – Los Angeles County hospital. Brathen is caged at the San Diego Zoo, a hundred or so miles north... Here, give me your hat, you wear mine.'

Queen Caron hesitantly swapped hats with Gwenda.

'Right, you leave first. Hopefully, wearing your hat might confuse whoever is tailing you for a while,' instructed Gwenda.

Queen Caron, Gareth and Arawn had taken a liking to Gwenda, despite her reserved nature. She had become a true friend in the short time they had known her. To part so abruptly was unsettling. They took it in turn to hug her and then hesitantly, Caron, Arawn and Gareth left the airport building, all on their own – it was unnerving. They felt vulnerable and alone. The small Kingdom was unintimidating, easy-going, quiet, peaceful and slow-paced, Los Angeles was none of these things. Arawn was spellbound, it was all new to him. So much noise and activity. So much concrete and tarmac. He failed to recognise any beauty in this Netherworld place.

They climbed into a waiting taxi. Three strange-looking travellers with hardly any luggage would have seemed odd to the driver if he cared to think about it, but getting his fare was his only concern.

'County hospital please,' said Gareth.

The hospital building was overwhelming and never-ending. They all regarded the castle in the Kingdom as huge, but this was on another scale.

'Are all buildings in the Netherworld, big, square and ugly?' asked Arawn.

'No, not at all. Some are quite beautiful,' said Queen Caron defensively.

'Nothing quite like the Kingdom's castle though,' said Gareth.

‘That’s true.’

They marched into the hospital entrance with no clue as to where to go – they had to ask. No doubt it would cause alarm bells, but there was no other way. The important thing was for Queen Caron to perform her magic on her sister, and then they could face whatever consequences that happened to arise.

‘I’ve come to see my sister. Apparently, she has been shot. and is dying,’ said Queen Caron assertively.

‘What is her name?’ asked the receptionist coldly.

‘Tegan Marutuk.’

‘Marutuk, Marutuk, no Marutuk here, did you mean Mauritius?’

‘No! Queen Tegan of Marutuk. She arrived here on a dragon!’ snapped Queen Caron.

‘Oh, her, Room 6, High dependency ward 3, wing ‘C’, third floor. The lifts are over there,’ said the receptionist aloofly.

‘Right, thanks,’ said Caron, puzzled by the cool response.

All three entered the lift. It was a scary experience for Arawn, but he was a brave knight.

‘They’re on their way,’ said the receptionist into her headset.

It was much easier than they thought it was going to be. They followed the signs for C wing and then the signs for the high dependency wards. Eventually, they found ward 3. A little disconcerting was that this particular ward had the word ‘secure’ after the number 3. Queen Caron’s heart was now racing. Any second now, she would be seeing her sister on her death bed. She knew it was all up to her. Only she could save Tegan’s life. She knew the basics, but it was a procedure she had never had to do before.

The corridor suddenly ended at a locked door with a keypad as the means of entering. Many doctors and nurses could be seen milling around inside, through the small safety glass window in the door. Arawn tapped on the window. A nurse momentarily broke off from her busy schedule and opened the door.

‘Can I help you?’

‘Room 6, I’ve come to see my sister,’ said Queen Caron, assertively.

‘Name?’

‘Tegan Marutuk – Queen Tegan – A girl who is dying from bullet wounds?’ Caron was running out of descriptions.

‘Oh, her. This way,’ said the nurse, nonchalantly.

The nurse took them to a room at the far end of the ward. It was far too easy – almost suspiciously easy. The nurse keyed in several numbers into the keypad door lock and opened the door for them. Queen Caron went in first.

It was a shock to her eyes. There, barely conscious, in a bed before her, was her precious sister. All manner of tubes and machines were attached to her delicate form trying to keep her alive. It didn’t look good at all. To add to her disturbing appearance, she was as white as a ghost – or it may have been her Goth makeup, it was hard to tell. Gareth and Arawn followed in behind. Things hadn’t particularly been going smoothly between Queen Tegan and her husband, Gareth, but he could tell just by looking at her, that the evilness had now vacated her body. He attempted to wake her. She stirred momentarily, opened her eyes and caught sight of him. She smiled and then floated out of consciousness. Caron suddenly realised the graveness of the situation. It was her twin sister lying there dying – her precious sister who she loved and always had loved, no matter what. Now it was solely up to her, to save her life.

‘What do I do first?’ panicked Queen Caron.

‘Just do your stuff!’ said Gareth eagerly. ‘I’ll uncover the wounds.’

‘This is the bit I have NOT been looking forward to. I don’t suppose anyone has a knife?’

‘I did have, but no matter,’ said Arawn.

Arawn smashed a glass beaker against the side of a table and selected a particularly sharp shard of glass.

‘Here, cut the palm of your hand.’

‘I know, I know! ... No, I can’t, you do it!’

Caron hesitantly moved her hand towards Arawn. Arawn didn’t hesitate. The glass shard effortlessly sliced a deep gash in her hand.

‘Ow, ow, ow, that really hurts!’

‘Come on, don’t waste your blood,’ urged Arawn.

Caron smothered both Tegan’s bullet wounds with her blood, it was a messy sight.

‘Now, what do we do?’ bleated Caron, now nursing her own wound.

‘Wait, I suppose,’ said Gareth.

They didn’t have long to wait. Moments later, thick, foul-smelling

smoke began to pour from both bullet wounds. Queen Tegan's skin shrivelled and charred, sinking right down to the depths of her rib cage. The bullets were now visible. Gareth carefully teased them out with the end of a teaspoon. The sight was truly horrendous. Most of Tegan's chest was now a charred black mess, but suddenly, almost imperceptibly, the edges of the wound began to close in. After five minutes, new skin was forming across the wounds. After ten minutes, both wounds were virtually gone with perfect, smooth unblemished skin in their place. Arawn took out all the tubes and needles and detached the electro-pads. All Tegan needed to do now was wake up.

'OK, Gareth, over to you now. She's a sleeping beauty,' said Caron poignantly.

It was all very awkward in front of people. Gareth gave his sleeping wife a quick kiss on the lips.

'Oh, come on! You'll have to do better than that!' snapped Caron.

Gareth had no choice but to be more intense. It would have to be a lingering, passionate snog – despite the black lipstick.

'Hello, sweetheart. God, how I have missed you,' said Queen Tegan sweetly with her eyes now open.

It was hard to believe that just a few minutes ago, Tegan was dying and there was nothing the surgeons and doctors could do. Now she was fully recovered, and hungry. It was entirely down to the magical properties of Queen Caron's blood. For Caron, Arawn and Gareth, it was something they had become accustomed to, after all, they were from a unique magical Kingdom. However, for anyone else, especially Netherworlders, what had just happened was astonishing, extraordinary and quite incredible.

For this reason, neither of the Queens could be allowed to leave.

## Chapter 19

### Men prefer blondes?

Three doctors or surgeons noisily stormed into the room.

‘Well, that was quite remarkable!’

‘Yes, unbelievable!’

‘Absolutely amazing!’

Clearly, they had watched the events unfold on a monitor somewhere outside and had waited for the right moment to barge in.

‘I’m fine now. I’m discharging myself,’ asserted Queen Tegan.

‘Evidently, you are, but let’s not be hasty. There are some tests we would like to do before you leave,’ said one of the doctors.

‘Not a chance,’ said Queen Caron, sternly.

‘Your blood has truly remarkable properties. You have just healed the unhealable. Your sister was dying and there was nothing any one of us could do for her. Now look, a quarter of an hour later, she is as good as new. We can’t possibly let a chance like this go by. Think of the hundreds... thousands of terminal cases your blood will heal throughout your life if we harvest your blood,’ said one of the doctors.

‘Harvest? Throughout my life? Firstly, I’m not a plant and secondly, I think you’re living in cloud cuckoo land,’ chirped Queen Caron.

‘You have to act for the greater good here. Your blood is unique, priceless,’ said one of the doctors.

‘And there’s the rub. Priceless more often than not means it has a price,’ said Gareth, shrewdly.

‘I’m afraid this opportunity is too good to let go. You can do this voluntarily or I can have you restrained,’ said one of the doctors.

‘Well, you can try,’ said Queen Caron.

‘If you have a conscience, you will have compassion for the terminally sick,’ said one of the doctors.

‘Let me explain something to you. In our Kingdom, we are prudent enough not to have bullets and guns which, most likely will cause the



injuries you want my blood to treat. As we don't have the benefit of fantastic hospitals like this and highly educated medics, our blood is all we have to treat the serious injuries in our Kingdom. So, yes, I have a conscience and I am compassionate. Perhaps if your obscenely wealthy pharmaceutical companies had more of a conscience and weren't so greedy, you could heal many of your terminally sick by yourselves!' said Queen Caron.

'Bang on, Sis,' cheered Queen Tegan.

'Yes, well said, darling,' said Arawn.

'Oh well, if that's your attitude, we have no choice,' said one of the doctors.

'Could you send your security team to the High Dependency ward 3, room 6, please? Code red,' said another doctor on his two-way radio.

Code red obviously meant immediately and a strong presence. Moments later, the room was filled with six burly men wearing crisp white shirts with gun holsters clearly visible.

'If you could remove these two men and strap the young ladies down on the beds, please,' said a doctor.

'Remove the men from the hospital or confine them?' asked one of the security team.

'Confine them, we may have to do some tests on them too.'

They accepted that there were too many armed security staff to fight back so for the time being they capitulated. There was no point in wasting energy and struggling although the Queens detested being manhandled and were very verbal about it. It was certainly no way to treat Queens of a unique Kingdom. Arawn and Gareth were led out of the room as the Queens were strapped down on the special hospital beds.

'Don't try and be brave, just yet, sweetheart,' said Queen Caron *in Welsh*.

'I'm itching to have a go at these muttonheads,' said Arawn *in Welsh*.

'I know. Just hang on.'

The room was now back to three doctors/surgeons and the secured Queens. There was no point in protesting anymore, the Netherworlders were unyielding in their course of action.

'I'll give you time to calm down and deliberate on your selfishness. In time, I know you will come around to our way of thinking,' said a doctor.

'Is this bloke for real?' asked Tegan, *in Welsh*.

'Perhaps he's a bit brain dead,' replied Caron *in Welsh*.

'Sorry I didn't catch that. Nurses will be in shortly to take some blood samples and a biopsy from your wound areas,' said another doctor and then they all left.

'Lucky we know another language,' said Caron *in Welsh*.

'Not so lucky that we're helplessly strapped down in hospital beds, seven thousand miles from home though... It's all my fault,' said Tegan remorsefully *in Welsh*.

'Couldn't be helped, it *wasn't* your fault. You were possessed by Queen Mererid's evil... You know I nearly died in that cave?'

'I'm so sorry, it's not as though I can't remember what I did. It was like I was consumed with hate and bitterness, with no reason for it. I hated everyone and everything with a passion. Somehow, I could justify the way I was and everything I did.'

Perhaps it wasn't the ideal moment to bring up a small matter of unfaithfulness, but the air needed clearing.

'Hmm, justify having some of my husband?' badgered Caron.

'What can I say? I'm truly sorry. I can't believe what I did. It's so embarrassing. Yes, I admit, Arawn is a hunk, there's no denying that, but I love Gareth more than words.'

'Well, I'll let you off this time! You're right though, he *is* a bit of a hunk, isn't he?' smirked Queen Caron.

They both laughed despite their serious predicament.

'Any idea how we're going to get out of this?' asked Tegan.

'Well, they can't be aware of our dangerous fingertips or they'd be taped up or something.'

'Or our other little talents.'

'Let's face it, we are pretty formidable. They don't stand a chance.'

'I love your confidence,' said Tegan.

'First things first, we need to get one of our hands free,' said Caron.

'What, like this?'

Tegan waved one of her hands in the air.

'A trick Gareth taught me... God, I've got some catching up to do. I've missed him so much.'

One hand free was all she needed, Queen Tegan was able to undo the other straps and then she undid Caron's straps.

'Now what?' asked Tegan.

'Well, I don't know about you, but I look quite good in a nurse's uniform. We're a bit conspicuous as we are, especially you!'

'And what's up with me? Goth style has its appeal!'

'Really?'

A short time later, two young female nurses entered the room. The Queens had wisely remained on their beds with the straps in place but unfastened. It was going to be an unfortunate experience for the two innocent nurses, but it couldn't be helped. What made it worse was that they were pleasant and chatty. They were just doing what they were told to do, which was to give both the Queens, a sedative. They had no notion of magical blood or that they were Queens from a dragon Kingdom.

Naturally, the nurses tried to struggle but they were hardly a match for Caron and Tegan. They managed to shout out briefly before the handy micropore plaster was firmly across their mouths. Fortunately, the nurses' cries were in vain. It was a hectic and noisy hospital with a thick security door to the room.

'Please will you take your uniforms off,' asked Queen Tegan, politely.

Naturally, they shook their heads and refused.

'I think they need persuasion. Show them what you've got, Sis' said Tegan.

'Must I? Oh well, if you think it will help,' said Caron glibly.

She attempted to do her fiery finger trick. She concentrated for all she was worth, but not so much as a puff of smoke came out of her fingertips.

'You need to have rage in your soul. Hate, detest something,' encouraged Tegan.

It wasn't something the Queens regularly did – if ever, firing lightning bolts out of their fingers, but Tegan's bit of advice worked a treat. To the nurses' horror, a searingly hot, bright, beam of fire, shot out of Caron's finger ends and singed the paint on the far wall. The nurses knew when to give in. They took their uniforms off and lay on the beds without any further prompting.

The uniforms were a good fit, if not a little baggy in places. Tegan did her best to remove the Goth makeup with whatever was at hand and

suddenly, the Queens were almost identical again. Well, they would have been if Tegan hadn't previously dyed her hair black. They had one last thing to ask the nurses before they left: the code for the door keypad. It was a challenge to answer with the micropore plaster, firmly stuck across their mouths, so they resorted to sign language – which was also a challenge with their hands now strapped down.

'You haven't fastened the straps too tightly, have you?' asked Caron.

'What do you think I am, evil?' replied Tegan.

Two *almost* identical Queens, dressed in nurses' uniforms, blended in well with the other staff. They were barely noticed. However, getting out of the secure ward now presented a problem. They hoped it was the same keypad code as the room where they had left the two fastened-up nurses, but it wasn't. By chance, a young male doctor spotted the nurse queens having problems with the keypad and hurried across to them.

'You have to press key 3 really hard, here let me,' he said.

'Thank you, you're an angel,' said Queen Caron.

'You're new here, aren't you? I'm sure I would have noticed a beauty like you before,' flirted the doctor.

'Flattery will get you everywhere,' replied Caron saucily.

Tegan felt a little left out. It had to be the jet-black hair, what else could it be? Other than that, they were identical. She made a point of getting back to blonde as soon as possible. The doctor followed the Queens down the corridor.

'I'm Tom by the way,' said the male medic, doctor, whatever.

'I'm Caron.'

'And I'm invisible,' said Tegan.

'Are you doing anything this evening by any chance,' asked Tom, his full attention concentrating on Caron and totally ignoring Tegan.

'I might be, depends on what's on offer,' said Caron.

'I think you two better get a room,' said Tegan.

'Don't mind my sister, told her the black hair wouldn't work.'

'I've got a friend who could make up a foursome,' said Tom.

'Don't bother!' snapped Tegan.

'Give me your phone number, I'll ring you after my shift,' said Caron.

Tom didn't hesitate and quickly wrote his number down on a bit of paper.

'Oh, before you go, perhaps you can help us. We've got to take some blood from a couple of chaps who've been taken into confinement. Second floor, isn't it?' asked Caron.

'Not even close. Confinement area it's on the ground floor, end of corridor D. Can't miss it. Anyway, have to get back. I'll speak to you... later, then?' anticipated Tom.

Queen Caron gave him one of her magical smiles. Being a magical Queen, it had the ability to melt the unsuspecting. Tom returned to the secure ward with a dance in his step.

'You know, sometimes, I think my sister's a bit of a tart,' said Queen Tegan.

'Don't knock it! Got results, didn't it?'

'At the earliest opportunity I'm calling at a chemist for light blonde,' said Tegan, sternly.

'Come on, no time to waste. Ground floor, corridor D. Our men are waiting,' said Queen Caron enthusiastically.

## Chapter 20

### Fake dragon?

Brathen was her name, but very few Netherworlders knew this. She was simply known as, the dragon. Sadly, all the other animals in the San Diego Zoo were overlooked. All the visitors were bothered about was seeing the genuine article: a real, fire-breathing dragon. However, as it happened, Brathen was proving to be a disappointment, even to the children. She was not, under any circumstances, going to perform and breathe fire. Naturally, this angered the savvy visitors who wanted their money's worth. At first, the zookeepers tried to be nice to Brathen. Naturally, that didn't work so they resorted to being cruel. Instead of one dead cow a day, she was only given a cow a week. This made matters much worse. Not only didn't she demonstrate her fire breathing abilities, but refused to move about. As a last result, they used a cattle prod. Naturally, this was a waste of time as all dragons are impervious to high voltage. Of course, if she could have directed her fiery breath at the cruel zookeepers, she would have obliged and put on a show. Unfortunately, though, she was imprisoned inside a special heat-resistant ceramic glass enclosure.

Despite this frustration for the zoo owners and the visitors, she was still an incredible sight. Her bottle green and purple scales, covering her body, glistened like gems in the sunlight. Her smooth, neatly pleated wings, folded perfectly into her body and her formidable head, intricate and weathered, gave her the menacing look required for such a creature. However, it was a sight that could have been reproduced. It could have been made out of plastics and steel and controlled by hydraulics and electric motors. The more sceptical of the visitors claimed that Brathen was a mere machine and angrily demanded their money back.

Despite all this, Brathen had a sixth sense. She knew her mistresses would make a bold attempt to rescue her. She just had to wait, tolerate the Netherworlders and try not to lay her egg just yet.

# Chapter 21

## Dragon blood

It wouldn't be long before the traumatised, de-uniformed nurses would be found and then all hell would break loose.

The Queens raced down corridor D – it was a long corridor. Right at the end was the expected locked door with a button to push. Tegan pressed the button.

A burly male guard opened the door.

'We've come to take blood samples from the detainees,' said Tegan, thrusting herself into him. Perhaps this particular male preferred black hair to blonde, she hoped.

'Had no notification. Hang on, wait here, I'll just check,' snapped the man.

'Detainees? Where've you come up with that word?' whispered Caron.

'They're detained, aren't they?' whispered Tegan.

'You do realise, any second now, we're going to be rumbled, big time?' said Caron.

'Better go in then. Remember, rage in your soul. Hate, detest something.'

'OK, OK!'

To their surprise, there were *two* men in the room – both armed.

'I said, wait outside!' bawled the first man.

'Hmm, doesn't seem as though he likes jet black hair either,' smirked Caron.

As the Queens had completely disregarded the man's instruction by entering the room, the armed men were forced to remove their guns from their holsters. On reflection, it did seem a little disproportionate: Two guns, held by two burly men, trained on two cute, slender, apparently inoffensive female nurses. The security men had no idea.

'I'll take the one on the left,' said Tegan.

'Are these girls for real?' laughed one of the men.

Before the men had a chance to react, two narrow, intense flames, like bolts of lightning, shot across the room from the queens' fingers and hit the men's pistols. Instantly the pistols dropped to the floor. Their hands were burnt and their weapons melted. With burnt hands, the men couldn't do anything but scream in pain. Retaliation of any sort was out of the question.

'Put your hands under cold running water,' said Tegan, as a good nurse would.

'Yeah, for a good ten minutes,' added Caron.

They did as she suggested.

'Where are our husbands?' asked Tegan calmly, while pointing her hand roughly in the direction of both men.

Both men hastily pointed to a locked room at the end of the room. They had no intention of having any other part of them scorched.

'Keys?!' boomed Caron.

'49194' said both men in unison.

'There seems to be a distinct lack of keys in this place,' said Tegan as they raced over to the secured door.

'Perhaps keypads are cheaper,' replied Caron.

Moments later, 49194 was keyed in and the door opened to reveal their beloved husbands.

'Took your time,' said Gareth as he hugged Tegan.

'Yes, must be getting on for an hour, I was starting to worry,' said Arawn as he hugged Caron.

'Come on, we have to get out of here, pronto. All hell is about to break loose, if it hasn't already,' said Tegan.

The security men still had their hands under cold running water as they dashed past them, back into corridor D.

'How do we get out of this place?' yelled Gareth.

'Follow the exit signs!' yelled Caron.

'This isn't going to work, we're going to run straight into them, again,' said Arawn. 'We need to hide somewhere until the dust settles.'

'Good thinking, how about that storeroom we just passed?' said Tegan.

No more than a minute after they had all squeezed into a rather small storeroom and closed the door, they heard tribes of security guards



running down the corridor, outside.

‘It won’t be long before they’ll discover us in here. They’ll be studying the CCTV,’ said Gareth factually.

‘CCT what?’ asked Arawn.

‘Nothing to worry about, Sugarplum. A Netherworld technology for spying on themselves,’ Caron explained.

‘Such an unnecessarily complicated world outside the Kingdom,’ said Arawn poignantly.

Finally, Gareth found a light switch. They were greeted with reams of toilet rolls, paper towels, sick bags, detergents, floor polish and all manner of things that cleaners require to keep toilets and floors in tip-top condition.

‘Well, we could put on these overalls, arm ourselves with mops and dusters and pretend we’re cleaners,’ said Gareth.

‘Yes, that might work. We could eventually clean our way towards the exit. Alternatively, we could climb out of that window,’ suggested Queen Tegan.

Huge complex buildings like hospitals can be very deceiving. With rooms within rooms, off never-ending corridors, natural light is a luxury. Most rooms are lit continuously by artificial light. Consequently, it is impossible to know if it is night or day. They hadn’t realised it, but while they had been inside the never-ending building, it had gone dark outside. It was now evening. Because of this, the small window in the storeroom, located behind some metal shelving, hadn’t drawn their attention until now. Arawn hastily pulled the shelving clear and opened the window. Unfortunately, for some obscure safety reason, it only opened a couple of inches. It was certainly no fire escape, but it would definitely keep people out – or in.

‘It’s no good, it won’t open wide enough,’ said Arawn despondently.

‘You should be able to release it, let me have a look,’ said Gareth. ‘I need a screwdriver or a knife.’

‘I did have a knife, a really good one, but...’

‘Yes, we know, it’s gone, live with it,’ snapped Caron. ‘Stand back, come on Sis, let’s do a bit of melting.’

The Queens proceeded to bombard the window mechanism with intense bolts of lightning from their delicate fingers. The mechanism quickly melted away allowing the window to open widely.

‘Getting the hand of this fire thing. Playing havoc with my nail varnish, though,’ said Tegan.

‘Well, you weren’t going to keep them black, surely?’

They all awkwardly climbed out of the small window. Arawn was last through, quickly glancing back at the room. It seemed that wayward sparks from the lightning bolts had inadvertently set fire to a few toilet rolls. Unfortunately, nearby paper towels and paper sick bags were equally as flammable.

Now distanced from the hospital building, the Queens took off their nurses’ uniforms. Caron noticed something solid in her uniform pocket, it was a mobile phone.

‘Wasn’t those nurses’ day, was it?’ said Caron. ‘I feel guilty. Don’t know why I didn’t notice it when I put the uniform on.’

‘You’ll just have to live with your guilt. There’s no way we can return it,’ said Gareth.

‘Actually, there is a way, but first I’m starving, and how convenient is that? A fast-food restaurant right across the road,’ said Tegan cheerfully.

Satisfied that they were in the clear, they made a bee-line to the restaurant. Gareth went to order the food and the others sat on plastic seats at a plastic table.

‘Do all these eating places have uncomfortable seats?’ grumbled Arawn.

Despite the lack of comfort, they took their time eating their meal. This time, Arawn ordered a doughnut as well as a cheeseburger. Naturally, it was a heart attack on a plate, well actually it didn’t come on a plate, but everything was absolutely delicious. Conveniently, they had a window seat looking across at the hospital. They watched as a stream of fire engines attempted to put out a fire in D wing. It was quite an inferno. Apparently, it all started in a storeroom.

They discussed many things and endeavoured to remain light-hearted despite their commitment. However, certain things had been building up for a while. Queen Tegan could no longer stay in denial, she regarded everything as her fault and suddenly burst into tears.

‘I am so sorry,’ she said between the sobs.

Gareth held her tightly and kissed her forehead. She sunk into his arms and sobbed even more. For so long, they had missed this attention from each other.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, sorry for what? Listen to me, none of this is your fault! You were the victim,’ said Caron sternly. ‘It could just as easily have been me with a stone in my shoe, then I would have been the one possessed by the evil instead.’

‘But you might not have left the Kingdom on a dragon.’

‘No, I might have done a lot worse!’ said Caron.

Arawn and Gareth did wonder exactly, what could have been worse, but their thoughts were inappropriate. A moment of silence followed while Tegan recovered from her remorse. They all watched indifferently, as even more fire engines arrived noisily, with wailing sirens. As the road was now closed, there was nothing to interrupt their view. The fire had all but gone out with just smoke and steam to show for what was earlier a raging fire. Not much was left of the hospital wing where corridor D, the storeroom and the confinement area used to be. One thing for certain, the hospital could no longer boast of having its own detention area. Caron broke the silence.

‘What did you think of Tom?’ asked Caron.

‘Quite dreamy actually, but do you think it’s proper to talk about him in front of our husbands?’ smirked Tegan, recovering quickly from her bout of guilt.

‘Do you think we could trust him?’

‘I don’t know about trust, but he’s definitely got the hots for you. Just flash your eyelids at him and he’ll come running,’ said Tegan.

‘We are here you know and you are speaking out loud,’ said Arawn.

‘We met this nice doctor, Tom. He let us out of the secure ward,’ said Caron.

‘So, he’s stupid then?’ concluded Arawn.

‘No... yes... probably, but he gave me his phone number.’

‘He did, did he!?’

‘Look, let’s be realistic, we need all the help we can get. A Netherworlder on our side would be very useful. Brathen is a hundred miles away, caged in impenetrable ceramic glass, under constant guard. It’s going to be difficult, to say the least,’ said Caron.

‘Yeah, you ring him and he’ll turn us in,’ said Arawn.

‘No, I don’t think so. Netherworlders aren’t all immoral and corrupt, you know.’

‘Just the odd few who tarnish the rest,’ insisted Gareth.

'I'll bet most of the doctors and nurses in that hospital would have been horrified if they knew what was in store for us in there,' said Tegan.

'I still think it's risky,' cautioned Arawn.

Caron took the nurse's mobile phone out of her pocket.

'Doubt you'll be able to use that, it'll be locked,' said Gareth.

Surprisingly, it wasn't. Caron keyed in the number Tom had provided.

'Hi, said I'd ring,' said Caron.

There was silence for a while before Tom said anything.

*'You do realise, I've nearly lost my job by helping you.'*

'No, you didn't. Look, I don't know what they've told you about my sister and me, but you have to know the truth.'

*'Some say that you are demons and arrived here on the back of a dragon. More likely is that you and your sister got shot during a robbery. How are the bullet wounds, by the way?'*

'My sister's fine now. The rumours are partly true, but we aren't demons, we are queens from a magical kingdom. My sister did arrive on the back of a dragon. The dragon's name is Brathen and she is held captive in San Diego Zoo.'

*'Well, yes, and I'm Willy Wonka and I own a chocolate factory. Come on, how gullible do you think I am?'*

'Look, I have no reason to lie. Believe what you want but there really is a dragon at San Diego Zoo.'

*'Yes, I know. It's robotic and quite realistic from what I've heard.'*

'She's not a robot, she's real and she wouldn't harm a fly... unless she's hungry... and she's about to lay her egg,' said Caron, rambling slightly.

The other end of the call went quiet for an uncomfortable amount of time.

'Tom! Are you still there?'

*'Er, yes. Just tried to access your sister's hospital file.'*

'So?'

*'Strange, it's as though she was never here. All the results have been deleted. Every test they did on your sister has been deleted.'*

'Of course, they're deleted. They had to cover up the truth. Look, can

we meet up? We need your help and there's a lot you need to know.'

*'And what if I bring the cops along?'*

'I know you won't do that, and besides, I need to return this mobile phone to the nurse.'

*'God, why does it always happen to me? OK, OK, I'll meet you in McDonald's in one hour,'* said Tom agitatedly.

'Yes, which one?'

*'400 yards west of this hospital – along Marengo Street. Oh, and by the way, be aware, your mug shots are all over the news for starting the fire. Disguises might be a sensible option.'*

The assistant gave them an awkward gaze as they paid the bill. Maybe it was just their imagination, perhaps she always gave that particular look if customers didn't give a tip. No matter, they thought it best to make a hasty exit and disappear into the shadows of evening time. However, their suspicions were realised when they heard a flurry of wailing police cars some distance behind them. Several armed officers piled into the restaurant, but they were too late.

'We have an hour to visit a department store, get some new clothes and get to the restaurant,' said Queen Caron.

Gareth hailed a taxi.

They made it to the department store with only fifteen minutes before closing time. This gave them very little time to choose hats, jackets, coats, dresses, jeans, sunglasses, underwear and makeup. For four people from a magical Kingdom, it turned out to be a very strange experience. While trying on their chosen clothes in the changing rooms, a message blasted out over the public address system;

*'The store is now closed. Any remaining customers must leave immediately.'*

Who were they to argue? They did as they were told and left the store, still wearing the assortment of new clothes. Strangely, No one asked for any money, but many devices wailed loudly at them, at the exit doors. Nobody attempted to challenge them. Obviously, none of the staff wanted to be late in leaving. Tegan insisted on going back and offering to pay for the items, but the doors were locked.

Now, they bared little resemblance to the images of the four wanted people.

Another taxi dropped them off, a block before the restaurant, they couldn't be too careful. Hiding in the darkness, they watched Tom,

park his car and enter. Full trust was not yet established. After fifteen minutes, there was no sign of the police, so all four entered.

Tom was leaning heavily over his latté. He'd had a hard day and he desperately wanted to go home and get some sleep. Queen Caron tapped him on the shoulder – he hadn't noticed them enter.

'We really appreciate you coming,' said Caron.

'A date is out of the question, then?' said Tom glumly.

'Sorry. This is my husband, Arawn,' said Caron, gently deflating his optimism. 'You've met my sister, Tegan and her husband, Gareth.'

They all sat down at the table with their warm sweet lattes.

'What's this all about? If you're messing me about, I *will* call the cops.'

'We understand why you're sceptical but here goes: My sister and I are Queens and we share the throne in a magical dragon Kingdom,' said Caron.

'Well, he's not going to believe any of that for a minute!' sparked Gareth.

'No, no, for argument's sake, and because I'm tired, I'm going to go along with that. Where exactly?' asked Tom.

'It's deep within the Patagonian ice field. The kingdom is called Marutuk,' said Gareth.

'Marutuk? That's where...?'

'Yes, where they killed all the dragons – harmless, peaceful creatures,' said Arawn angrily.

'Surely, that was all make-believe. Just a realistic drama?'

'Can we trust him?' asked Gareth.

Caron, Arawn and Tegan nodded uneasily.

It was time that Tom knew the whole story whether he believed any of it or not: the fake invasion, the fake nuclear device, how Queen Tegan was possessed with evil, why a dragon had turned up in Los Angeles and why a queen of a Kingdom had found her way into his hospital.

'OK, so what do you want from me?' asked Tom apprehensively.

'Help us free the dragon before she lays her egg,' said Caron spritely.

'Not much then?' said Tom.

Just at that moment, the supervisor came over and asked them to

leave. It was closing time.

‘Can you recommend a hotel for the night?’ asked Gareth.

‘It would be a bit of a squeeze, but you could stay at my place,’ said Tom.

‘That’s kind of you but we can afford a hotel,’ said Caron.

‘Oh, ok, there’s the Hilton just around the corner from me, a bit pricy though,’ suggested Tom.

‘That’ll do fine. Could you take us there?’ asked Arawn.

‘Yes, I suppose so, a bit of a squeeze, but it won’t be the first time I’ve had five in my old Porsche.’

After fifteen minutes of extremely compressed travelling in a noisy old classic Porsche, they pulled up outside a very posh-looking hotel.

‘My apartment is just around the next block. I’ll ring you in the morning,’ shouted Tom through the small side window.

‘No, I’ll ring you,’ said Queen Caron assertively.

Tom’s car was even noisier on the outside. The exhaust note reverberated around the buildings and then suddenly stopped. Clearly, Tom’s apartment wasn’t far away. Moments later, halfway up the posh hotel steps, they heard a loud bang coming from roughly the same direction.

‘That sounded like a gunshot,’ said Gareth.

‘Yes, from Tom’s direction. Quick, let’s go!’ urged Caron.

To the shock of all four, they found Tom collapsed on the cold damp pavement next to his parked car. A bullet wound to his chest was bleeding heavily.

‘He, he came from nowhere... took my wallet,’ groaned Tom.

‘Lie still, you have a nasty chest wound,’ said Tegan.

‘I know... lower sternal region... punctured the left ventricle... my times up I’m afraid,’ gasped Tom.

‘Nonsense, lie still. My turn I think,’ said Tegan firmly. ‘Undo his shirt!’

‘Damn, still haven’t got a knife,’ groaned Arawn.

‘Have a look in Tom’s car, see if there’s anything sharp,’ said Tegan.

Seconds later, Gareth returned with a can of pop.

‘The last thing he needs at the moment is a drink of Irn Bru,’ scowled

Caron.

Gareth said nothing but proceeded to empty the can, crush it and waggle it until it was in two halves with a sharp metal edge exposed.

‘That should be sharp enough! Give me your hand, sweetheart,’ said Gareth, casually.

It was something only Gareth could do – slice the palm of his wife’s hand. He squirmed as the sharp metal sank deeply into Tegan’s skin. Instantly, blood began to freely drip from the cut.

‘Ow! God, that stings!’ screamed Tegan.

‘Come on, don’t waste it!’ snapped Caron.

Tegan let the blood build up in the palm of her hand and then plunged it onto Tom’s bullet wound. As to be expected, there was blood everywhere. Even though Tom was very close to death, he still had enough energy to scream out with even more pain. Almost immediately, a large area of skin around the entry point began to smoulder. The air filled with smoke and the pungent smell of burning flesh. Moments later, Tom’s skin around the bullet wound had almost burnt away, revealing his ribcage. The sternum began to dissolve away to reveal his heart, attempting to beat with a bullet inside it. Now revealed were the inner workings of his heart – the valves and empty chambers where blood should have been flowing. The single bullet was inside one of the chambers. Arawn carefully teased it out with the end of the spoon he’d used previously. As soon as that was done, the process began to reverse. New bits of heart tissue began to form until once again it was a sealed organ. It began to beat once more. The pericardial sac reformed over his heart and the rib cage slowly grew back. All the while, the area of burnt flesh was closing in, becoming smaller and smaller as new flesh was forming.

After fifteen minutes, Tom’s fatal wound had completely healed, but he was still lying still and unconscious.

‘You know what he needs now, don’t you?’ said Caron.

‘Yes, a girlfriend and don’t look at me!’ snapped Tegan, ‘I’ve done my bit and my hand’s throbbing.

‘Caron, do it, just do it. I suppose it will make us even,’ insisted Arawn.

‘Well, he is quite dishy,’ said Caron.

‘That doesn’t help!’ growled Arawn.

Apparently, it was the kiss that brought the patient back into the



living. A mere peck would not suffice, it had to be a full-on snog. In Caron's mind, she could justify a small amount of infidelity. When her sister was evil, she deceived Arawn many times and brazenly had her wicked way with him.

The passionate kiss continued for many a while before Tom finally drew breath, regained consciousness and sat up.

'That was nice, is this heaven,' he asked sleepily.

'No, it's not, and don't get any ideas, although, it wasn't entirely unpleasant,' said Caron with a smirk.

'Are we even now?' asked Arawn.

'One rogue kiss in exchange for several naughties with my sister?' jibed Caron.

It was always best to make light of what had just happened. It was incredible, extraordinary. It was simply magic, there was no other word for it. Tegan, this time, had undeniably saved Tom's life. Even if Tom could have managed to get to a hospital before his last breath expired, there was little the hospital and all its surgeons could have done for him.

'What have you just done?' asked a bewildered Tom.

'Tegan's just saved your life,' said Gareth.

'But, but, how? I was fatally shot in my heart! There isn't even a mark there now,' said Tom as he buttoned up his blood-soaked shirt.

'Just count yourself lucky that there were us demons around,' said Tegan.

'Come on, you need to get to your apartment. You've lost quite a lot of blood. You need to get some rest,' said Gareth.

Arawn helped Tom up on his feet and then supported him. Tom was still quite weak, probably, more with shock than anything else. Just at that moment, a police car screeched around the corner with blue lights dazzling. The last thing they wanted was police interference at this moment in time. For one thing, they would have to explain Tom's blood-soaked shirt with no apparent wound.

'Reports of a gunshot in this area. Have you seen anything?' shouted the police officer through his opened window.

'Heard something a while back. Could have been a car backfiring,' said Gareth.

That seemed to be enough to satisfy the officer. Besides, it was late, he

was on his own and his shift ended in ten minutes.

Tom's lavish apartment was on the tenth floor and provided amazing views over Los Angeles. However, that's where the splendour ended: It was untidy, messy and desperately in need of a good dusting and Hoovering.

'Wow, definitely got potential. Doctors must on a good whack,' said Gareth.

'Yes, a pity junior doctors aren't. Sorry about the mess. It's on the market. Too much of a drain on my pay packet,' said Tom.

'You'll have to report the incident to the police, you know?' said Gareth.

'More important, I need to freeze my bank cards,' said Tom.

Suddenly Tom went very pale and started to sweat heavily.

'Tom, you've gone as white as a sheet, are you alright?' asked Caron with concern.

'This is to be expected – symptoms of shock. Excuse me while I go and spew my guts up,' said Tom as he rushed towards the bathroom.

'We can't leave him like this,' said Caron in a lowered voice.

'I'll stay until the cops get here,' said Gareth.

'No, you three go and book the rooms. I'll be over shortly, I'll make him a cuppa,' said Caron.

Ten minutes later, Tom emerged, hair combed, a bit more colour in his cheeks and wearing a fresh clean white shirt.

'Where is everybody?' asked Tom.

'Gone to book the rooms. I'll wait here with you until the cops arrive.'

'Thanks, that's kind of you, but honestly, I feel fine now – remarkably.'

'Are you sure,' said Caron softly.

'You do realise that you and your sister have just saved my life. That's the problem with being a doctor, you know what's going on in your body, especially with bullet wounds. Sometimes ignorance is definitely an advantage.'

'Ever likely you went into shock.'

'Er, what exactly did you two do to me?' asked Tom tentatively.

'We mended you! Something the rulers of the Kingdom are blessed

with. Our blood is somehow linked with dragon blood. It destroys and regenerates human tissue. That's as good an explanation as you're going to get.'

'You do realise what you're saying is medically and scientifically impossible.'

'But it happened. Why do you think we were held in that security ward? They wanted to analyse our blood,' said Caron.

'They told us that you and your sister were on some new class A drug. You were to be kept there until the drug was identified... We're talking magic here, aren't we?'

'Tut, tut, Doctor! Surely there's no such thing,' chirped Caron. 'Anyway, my patient, you need to rest, I'll go and put the kettle on.'

Tom made himself comfortable while Caron endeavoured to find the kettle, mugs, coffee, milk and sugar. It was quite a while before she returned with two mugs of hot sweet coffee. She placed them on the coffee table and sat down on the sofa.

'What exactly, did your husband mean when he said, are we even now?' asked Tom.

'A long story. Basically, we are identical twins. Tegan once pretended to be me. To be fair, Arawn had no idea of the deception.'

'Oh, I see, a bit of a rogue then, your sister?'

'No, she was possessed with evil at the time.'

'Oh, yes, I remember you saying. More magic?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

Caron could have sat on another chair, but for no particular reason, she chose to share the sofa with Tom. Their legs were already harmlessly brushing against each other. It was no great effort to move even closer together.

'So, was it Tegan's blood, or your kiss, that healed me?' asked Tom softly.

'Definitely my kiss, you'd still be unconscious...'

'Are you even now, then?'

By now, their voices had become mellow and sensual.

'Perhaps not quite. Actually, I think a little more healing is probably necess...'

Before Caron could finish off what she was saying, their lips had

already drifted together, *again*. It turned into a lingering passionate kiss. Then, instinctively, Caron's and Tom's hands started misbehaving. Caron was consumed with desire and was rapidly reaching the point of no return – so was Tom. Caron had already undone most of the buttons on Tom's new clean shirt and Tom had purposely ruffled Caron's skirt far beyond the top of her thigh.

Suddenly, Caron became fully aware of her senses and realised what she was doing.

'Oh my God, what the hell am I doing? I'm happily married – I'm sure I am. I'm so sorry, I don't know what came over me, it must be your aftershave. I love Arawn,' she ranted.

'More to the point, what am I doing? Totally disgraceful behaviour. I'm truly sorry. I can only suspect that it must be the after-effects of the shock,' bleated Tom.

Of course, it was nothing to do with the aftershave or shock. She really should have read the instruction manual on *being a Queen of the Marutuk Kingdom*, but of course, there was no such thing – or was there?

## Chapter 22

### Mental contact

The next day, Tom had to take a few days off, not that he was sick or anything. By rights, he should have been stone-cold dead, but he was fine – more than fine. The truth was, he needed the time off to help four people from a magical Kingdom, liberate a dragon named Brathen. For this very reason, he couldn't possibly give a reason for his hasty request for leave.

Tom was the only one who possessed the correct documents to be able to hire and drive a vehicle. A spacious, green Toyota people carrier was signed for and the hundred-mile journey began.

'San Diego Zoo, here we come,' said Tom excitedly.

Caron desperately wanted to sit in the front, next to Tom who was driving. However, she knew, deep down, that it was improper and gave way to Gareth sitting up front instead.

'Any thoughts as to how you are going to release this dragon?' asked Tom as he confidently negotiated the six-lane highway.

'Surrounded by one-inch thick, triple laminated ceramic glass? Absolutely no idea. Probably, not even a wrecking ball will touch it,' answered Gareth truthfully.

'A warrior would look for a weakness. Everything has a weakness somewhere,' said Arawn in his capacity of a Kingdom knight.

'There speaks a true Marutukian,' said Caron proudly.

'Poor old Brathen. How wicked was I to put her through all this? She'll probably want nothing to do with me anymore,' sighed Tegan.

'Brathen's smarter than you think. She must have known that you were possessed,' said Caron.

'Hang on, hang on! Now you're telling me that dragons are intelligent?' gasped Tom.

'Of course, they're intelligent! What do you think their huge head is filled with, sawdust?' snapped Tegan.

As it happened, the rear-view mirror was conveniently adjusted so

Tom could make eye contact with Caron behind him. There were many unavoidable sheepish glances at each other throughout the journey. Three hours later, after a stop for breakfast en route, they arrived at the large San Diego Zoo car park. Caron bought five tickets to get in and then another five tickets to see the special attraction – which happened to be Brathen. The whole experience was very pricy. It was no wonder many people were agitated that Brathen refused to breathe flames, roar or do any other dragon associated stuff.

As soon as they were in the complex, the Queens were subliminally aware of Brathen's presence. They had a mental link, a kind of symbiosis. The men, of course, had no such feelings other than detecting that the queens were very anxious.

For the unique attraction, they had to queue for well over an hour. Gareth was elected to fetch five ice creams, the white chocolate covered ones, to cool them down.

Eventually, they were let through into a display area. The organisers certainly hadn't wasted any time in setting things up. A sort of museum with ancient maps and charts filled the walls. A poor scale-model representation of a dragon explained all the unique features of such a fabled creature. Made-up sound effects resounded around the room and random bursts of flame-throwing all added to the effect. Of course, it was all in poor taste and no more than guesswork. It was all done to enhance the visitor's experience. Finally, they came to the end of the rather tacky exhibition and passed through a small tunnel, surrounded by frightening roaring noises. Suddenly Brathen, in all her glory, was presented before them. The majority of the visitors, gasped and shrieked, but not the visitors from the Kingdom.

The queens couldn't help but weep at the pitiful sight. Even Gareth and Arawn found it hard to keep the tears away. Such a unique and magnificent creature, so cruelly caged, simply for a commercial venture. Even Tom could see the shameful injustice and the awful depths his own people had sunk to in the name of profiteering.

It was easy to forget how big real dragons are and Brathen was certainly no exception. Up until now, she had remained docile, unthreatening and mostly motionless, but now she detected the queens, heard their thought and felt their pain. Brathen somehow knew they had come to rescue her so that she could return to her Kingdom and lay her precious egg. These feelings stirred inside her. No longer was the formidable creature subdued. No longer was she wallowing in despair. Her depression lifted. Finally, she put on a show. She breathed fire as she had never done before. The ceramic glass held but blackened considerably. She wrenched at the chains

wrapped around her talons, but they held, too. She flapped her enormous wings, but there was no hope of flight.

She was well and truly tethered.

‘Don’t worry old girl, we will return later, to free you,’ *thought* Queen Caron.

‘I am so sorry for what I’ve put you through. Have faith dear friend,’ *thought* Queen Tegan.

The *thought* waves passed through the one-inch-thick glass without impedance and instantly calmed her. However, this was not before every nuance of typical dragon behaviour had been videoed on countless mobile phones, camcorders and CCTV.

‘Tom, can you join in with the rest? Do a bit of videoing on your phone. We need to plan how we’re going to do this,’ said Gareth.

It was now time to pay an exorbitant price for five coffees in a dragon-themed café and discuss matters. They all squeezed together around a small table with Caron’s thin and shapely legs firmly in contact with Tom’s equally well-toned legs.

‘We’ll have to come back when it’s quiet, after closing time,’ said Arawn.

‘There are cameras everywhere, they’ll see us, and there’ll be motion detectors,’ said Gareth.

‘So, ignoring those two minor hurdles, how do we set Brathen free?’ asked Queen Caron purposefully.

Tom took the opportunity to playback the video on his phone.

‘It appears to be...’ began Tom.

‘It is a *she* and *she* is called Brathen!’ snapped Tegan.

‘Sorry, Brathen... appears to be held down with anchor chains around her talons. We’ll have to cut through them somehow. Can a dragon do a vertical take-off?’ asked Tom.

‘Should be able to do, but being chained up for so long, who knows,’ said Arawn.

‘Well, if *she* can, there’s no roof to the glass cage. With nothing to hold her down, *she* should be able to make a clean getaway,’ said Tom.

‘So, we have to defeat the Netherworld technology, get into the cage and then cut through some very sturdy steel,’ said Caron showing a minimal degree of optimism.

‘Getting into the cage is the easy bit, we just go through the feeding hatch,’ said Gareth.

After much discussion, a small shopping list formed: a cordless angle grinder, metal cutting discs, rubber gloves, a bolt cutter, a torch and a knife for Arawn – he was lost without one. It was down to Tom to fetch these items. He was the only legal driver.

Time was moving on, soon it would be closing time. Tom had only two hours to find a tool store, buy the items and get back into the zoo. He wanted company – specifically Caron’s, and Caron dearly wanted to go with him, but that would have certainly aroused suspicion. Queen Caron’s mind jostled between what was morally right and her innermost desires. She was happily married to Arawn... of course, she was. Caron glanced longingly at Tom before he departed.

The remaining four now had some delving to do. They weren’t there to gawp at the giraffes and gaze at the monkeys, they were there to find a way of liberating an actual real dragon – without anyone getting caught. That would be disastrous. Gareth had astutely pointed out that the CCTV cameras, motion detectors and spotlights had one thing in common, they needed electricity. If they cut the power, they wouldn’t be seen or detected.

It was a large complex, but somewhere within the grounds, there had to be an electric substation filled with many fuse boxes and circuit breakers. It happened to be an easy building to find simply by tracing back the overhead powers lines. As expected, the entrance door was padlocked, but this slight hurdle was hardly going to present much of a problem. Too many people were around to do anything for now. They would have to wait for nightfall.

Tom arrived back at the complex with only three-quarters of an hour to go before closing time. He forgot to take his entrance ticket with him so he had to pay again – full price. He considered complaining that there wasn’t a reduced charge for late visiting, but drawing attention to himself with a bulging rucksack on his back may have been unwise.

They all met back at the café. Queen Caron couldn’t resist and gave Tom a quick hug. Apparently, it was a gesture of gratitude, but it could easily have been misinterpreted as something more intimate. Fortunately, Arawn was oblivious to his wife’s fixation. However, their behaviour hadn’t gone unnoticed.

‘We have to lay low somewhere in the grounds until it goes dark,’ said Gareth.

‘Something you lot haven’t thought about: I would say for certain that



the customers are counted in and out,' said Tom.

'You're right, they'll know five people are still somewhere in the grounds,' panicked Gareth.

'Nothing we can do about that. Should make life interesting though,' said Tegan casually.

Hiding was no problem, there were mature bushes and deep undergrowth everywhere. They thought it prudent to stay as a group, so they huddled together beneath a patch of rhododendron bushes. Tom was on one side of Caron, Arawn on the other. She squeezed tightly against Tom's warm body. It certainly made lying on the damp dirty ground, worthwhile.

Finally, an announcement echoed around them on the public address system. The zoo was closing in ten minutes. Then another announcement that the zoo was now closed. Then another announcement in a more threatening tone,

*'Any persons remaining in the complex are now regarded as trespassers. Armed security staff have instructions to deal severely with unauthorised persons.'*

'Sugar! Does that mean fired on? A bit extreme for lingering in a zoo, don't you think?' whispered Gareth.

'Good job I've now got a knife,' said Arawn.

After a short while, the security staff could be heard approaching, talking into their two-way radios. As it was still daylight, they would certainly be seen if they emerged from their refuge. However, there was another more serious problem: the security staff had dogs with them – large Alsatis. The dogs would surely sniff them out. Predictably, one of the dogs latched on to the scent of four Marutukians and one Netherworlder. Tom reached into his backpack and pulled out an aerosol.

'Lucky someone has thought ahead. Dog repellent! Safe but effective, it says on the can. Spray yourselves with it,' whispered Tom smugly.

'Clever boy!' praised Caron. Ideally, she wanted to hug and kiss him for his prudence.

'Strewth, it stinks!' moaned Gareth.

A wandering, sniffing Alsatian suddenly started to dog-sneeze in response to the repellent and retreated back to his master.

'That's the whole grounds searched. The dogs haven't picked up anything,' said the security man into his two-way radio.

*'OK, must have been a glitch on the turnstiles. See you back in the cabin,'* came the reply back.

Finally, much later, it was dark. At last, they could emerge from their hiding place. It was time to put their plan into action.

'Gareth and I, will go and deal with the power,' said Tom assertively.

Naturally, Caron didn't like Tom's choice of partner, but she knew she had to be rational and put her feelings to one side.

'Wait here until we cut the power. Hopefully, the lights will go out along with security cameras and the motion detectors,' said Tom.

Both Queens and Arawn responded with a nod.

Tom and Gareth did their best to keep in the shadows of the various street lamps and other sources of lighting. Eventually, they made it to the electric substation building without alerting anyone. The bolt cutter made light work of the padlock on the door and then they were presented with a vast array of circuit breakers.

'What do we do, turn them all off?' suggested Gareth.

'We could do, but we have a bolt cutter and rubber gloves,' said Tom.

'Like your thinking,' said Gareth.

Gareth located a thick black cable which came down from the ceiling and entered what was obviously the main circuit breaker.

'Problem solved, we just turn off this circuit breaker,' chirped Gareth.

'I think a more permanent form of disruption would be best, don't you?' suggested Tom.

'You do it then. Me and electricity don't really get on,' said Gareth.

Tom put on the rubber gloves and Gareth stood back. The bolt cutters just about went around the thick black cable.

'Here goes nothing,' said Tom.

With a quick squeeze of the handles, the cable sparked and fizzled like a firework and then the lights promptly went out.

Now with everywhere in pitch dark, it was down to the Queens and Arawn to proceed with the rescue. It was a challenge finding their way to the dragon exhibit, barely being able to see their hands in front of their faces. They avoided using the torch as it would have stood out like a beacon in the pitch-dark complex. The mental connection the Queens had with Brathen, helped to guide them roughly in the right direction. The entrance to the dragon exhibition was unsecured and

open. Using the torch as briefly as possible, they fumbled their way across the room, colliding with just about everything: exhibits, pillars, walls and each other. Finally, after many bruises, they were out in the open again. Somewhere in the darkness, before them, was Brathen in the glass enclosure. The torch guided them to the feeding hatch. It was large enough to pass whole dead animals through so it was easily large enough for people. Arawn followed by the Queens, crawled through it and suddenly, they were next to Brathen.

Such a formidable creature, but no one feared the terrifying sight. The queens tenderly stroked Brathen's neck and in doing so, made mental contact.

Arawn had never seen an angle-grinder before, let alone use one, but surely if he could handle swords and spears, he could handle a puny Netherworld contraption. The battery was charged up and the cutting disc was bolted on. All he had to do was press the on-switch and cut through the chain. For several minutes, the spray of hot sparks lit up the surroundings and then, at last, the clasps fell from Brathen's talons – she was free. Arawn had to concede that the Netherworld device was indeed a formidable weapon. He would try and make one when he got back to the Kingdom.

'She can go home now,' said Arawn.

There was a lingering pause before Queen Tegan replied.

'She can't go right now.'

'She has to go, now!' bawled Arawn.

'She's about to lay her egg.'

'She can't possibly lay her egg here,' argued Arawn.

'Laying her egg safely, means everything to her,' said Queen Caron.

Just at that moment, they heard noises coming from the exhibition hall. Their hearts sank. It seemed that the noise and sparks from the angle grinder had alerted the security officers. They all held their breaths. It seemed that their mission to free Brathen was about to fail miserably.

'How are you doing? Cut through those shackles yet?' asked Tom cheerily.

It was a huge relief. Two friendly faces emerged out of the darkness. Queen Caron couldn't help herself and impulsively threw her arms around Tom and followed up with a lingering kiss.

'Successful then?' said Arawn, a little unsettled with the excessive

show of affection.

‘The lights are out, aren’t they?’ gloated Gareth.

‘We have a problem, Brathen is about to lay her egg, she won’t leave,’ said Tegan.

‘You’re kidding! What, laying it right now?’ doubted Tom.

‘Well, she’s ready, but it could be hours,’ said Caron.

‘You do realise the consequences of her laying a dragon egg while she’s held captive? She has to leave,’ insisted Gareth.

There didn’t seem to be a solution to the problem, but Tom had an idea.

‘Do you think she could fly twenty miles as she is? There’s a place called Fruit Tree Cove, east of here. It’s out of the way. A lake in the middle of a forest. She could lay her egg safely there,’ suggested Tom.

‘We’ll put it to Brathen,’ said Tegan.

Nothing was said. Both Queens gently stroked Brathen’s long scaly neck and passed on their thoughts to her. The dragon made many noises, huffs and snorts in protest, but eventually made the best decision.

‘We have to leave the enclosure, now!’ insisted Caron.

It was a wise precaution. If they had remained within the glass enclosure, they may have been whipped by Brathen’s enormous wings or pummelled with the downdraft as she took flight.

The security staff, accompanied by dogs, were now closing in. It didn’t take a genius to work out what was happening – a discrepancy of five people at the turnstiles and the main power cable severed. There was always the chance that the zoo’s prized possession could be poached, rustled or whatever word applied to a dragon. A real fire-breathing dragon was a valuable asset to any establishment and many would go to great lengths to acquire her.

Perhaps Brathen didn’t have the intelligence of a human, but she had enough common sense to know that she had to escape the cruel confines of the zoo. She prepared for flight by warming her enormous wings with her flaming breath and then applied every ounce of her strength to her wing muscles. One flap was enough to clear the ceramic glass cage – her cruel home for many days. She hovered in the air for a few moments and spotted the security officers approaching with her exceptionally sensitive vision. She could have incinerated them in an instant, but she knew her mistresses would not

approve. All she could do was communicate her thoughts and give a warning.

‘Thank you, petal, get yourself to safety. We’ll get to you as soon as we can,’ *thought* Queen Caron. Queen Tegan’s thoughts were also on similar lines, but with an addition, ‘please don’t eat any humans on the way.’

It was doubtful if the dog repellent would work for a second time, but they still topped up with the spray. Most likely, they outnumbered the security staff, but without guns, they were at a serious disadvantage. Guns always seemed to make a big difference in the Netherworld. No one in the Netherworld particularly approved of violence, but it was the usual argument: They had to protect themselves against other people who had guns to protect themselves. The security staff were no exception, they had to protect themselves because their wives and family wanted them to come home at the end of the day, alive and well.

Of course, the Queens had the means to incinerate them with their fingers, but that *was* the last resort.

All credit to the security men, they were good at their job. Four of them had managed to creep up and surround Brathen’s liberators. Blinded by four very bright torches, the rescue team were unable to see their adversaries, but they sensed four snarling dogs and four pistols trained on them.

‘We’ve got them. Have the cops been informed?’ asked one of the security staff on his two-way radio.

*‘Affirmative, they’re on their way. How many?’ crackled the reply.*

‘Three men, two women. Er, you’re not going to like this. The dragon’s gone.’

*‘Sorry, please repeat. Sounded like you said the dragon’s gone.’*

‘Yes, the cage is empty.’

*‘Damn! Have the dogs been deployed?’*

‘Negative, no point.’

‘Well, if nothing else, they’re certainly coming across as professional,’ whispered Caron calmly.

‘If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a blinding torch in my eyes,’ moaned Tegan.

‘Stand still and don’t move!’ bawled one of the men.

Naturally, the four security guards with guns, dogs and torches were not happy. They knew that their employers would be furious that their prize possession, the dragon, was missing.

‘Doesn’t stand still, and don’t move, mean the same thing,’ puzzled Arawn.

As the Queens saw it, there was only one way out of this. Unfortunately, it involved four dead dogs and a few burnt hands. To set this particular outcome in motion, the Queens needed Arawn’s knife.

‘Arawn, knife, we need to bleed,’ whispered Caron.

Slitting the palm of your hand with a knife is unpleasant at the best of times. Doing it behind their backs, out of sight of the security men, not knowing how deep they had cut themselves, made it all the more unpleasant – and painful. The Queens’ faces grimaced as their blood dripped onto the ground, forming two small puddles. Arawn, Gareth and Tom had no idea why they had done this wilful damage to themselves, but the Queens remembered their grandpa’s tales and how he defeated the foxes.

It had to be now before the blood soaked into the ground.

‘I’ll take the two on the left. You take the two on the right,’ whispered Tegan. ‘Now!’

The Queens aimed their fingertips at the security men’s torches. In a blaze of fire and lightning, their torches melted and their hands singed. Instinctively, they dropped the melted torches, but also released the four dogs. At first, the Alsations raced towards the five offenders, not knowing which particular one to sink their teeth into first, but suddenly, they stopped in their tracks. They had caught the scent of the queens’ blood. It was irresistible, like nectar to their snouts. They were drawn to the puddles and proceeded to lick every last drop.

Moments later it began.

The dogs howled, screamed and wrenched in pain. They were on fire from within. Flames gushed from their mouths and out of their bottoms. A minute or so later, the dogs were just four piles of black ash on the ground.

Now the security guards were really annoyed. They had no idea what had just happened, nor for that matter had Arawn, Gareth and Tom. For a while, the guard’s beloved burning pooches had lit up the surroundings, but now without any illumination, pitch dark returned. With their good, unburnt hands, they began randomly firing their

guns into the blackness. It would be a pure chance if they actually hit anyone.

By pure chance, Gareth got hit in the foot.

Nothing else for it, it was time to run. They did have an advantage, a working torch, but if they used it, the guards would know where to aim their guns. Through the exhibition hall, they ran – Gareth hobbled. Then out into the complex and towards the entrance. The security guards made a bold effort to pursue them in pitch dark, but they hadn't got their hearts in it. They had lost the dragon and now their precious dogs. Adding to this, they were reeling in pain from their burnt hands.

Getting out of the complex was an easy matter of just passing through a turnstile. The mechanism refused to be hurried as the cast-iron circular gate turned and clunked in its own good time. Finally, they were in the car park. Their vehicle and sanctuary were seconds away.

Queen Tegan noticed Gareth struggling to walk.

'Gareth, sweetheart! What's wrong?'

'Just a little twinge in my foot. You go on, I'll catch up,' said Gareth, stoically.

Without hesitation, Arawn loaded Gareth onto his muscly shoulders. He noticed blood dripping from his foot.

'He's been shot,' shouted Arawn as he ran across the car park with his load.

Just as the doors of the people carrier closed, the wail of the police cars, broke the evening silence.

'Quick, interior light off! Heads down!' snapped Tom.

Four police cars screeched into the car park. Many police officers jumped out and headed for the zoo entrance. One officer stayed behind and began checking the remaining vehicles on the car park. There were only six vehicles, including the people carrier, for the officer to check. It was only a matter of time before he would be waving his torch through the window of the people carrier. Unfortunately for the officer, well before he had the chance to flash his torch through the glass, Arawn had whacked the heavy vehicle door into him, knocking him clean off his feet. Another blow from Arawn's fist and the poor, unsuspecting officer was out cold.

'I hope he's alright,' said Caron.

'He'll be fine, just a little tap,' said Arawn calmly.

Even before Arawn had fully climbed back inside, Tom was gently pressing the accelerator pedal and creeping across the car park with the headlights turned off. They remained off until the vehicle was back on the main highway.

Tegan now concentrated on attending to her husband's bullet-wounded foot. With his blood-soaked sock removed, even in the poor light, she could see that it was little more than a graze. It certainly wasn't life-threatening. Despite this, it didn't stop Gareth from doing his fair share of whinging.

'Time to do your stuff, again, Sis?' suggested Caron.

'Not on your life! I'm not having half my foot burnt away. A plaster will do fine. It'll heal up on its own thank you very much!' snapped Gareth.

'Please yourself. It wouldn't be any bother. My hand hasn't fully healed yet. It could easily squeeze a little more blood out of it,' said Tegan like an overbearing nurse.

'I wouldn't say no, to one of those reviving kisses off you, though,' suggested Gareth.

Tegan didn't have to be asked twice. After all, she was now deeply in love with her husband – again.

'Oh, for goodness' sake,' said Caron snidely.

Tegan finished off her passionate kiss with Gareth before she made a snappy reply. Perhaps it was a reply she wished she hadn't said.

'You can talk!'

'And what's that supposed to mean?' huffed Queen Caron.

'Oh, come on, we've all seen the way you are with Tom.'

'I don't know what you mean. I love Arawn, my husband!' insisted Caron.

'Yes of course you do,' muttered Tegan.

Ladies, ladies. We need to stay focused. Brathen and her egg are our main concerns for the moment. We need to call in somewhere for drinks and snacks to take with us. I've got a feeling it's going to be a long night. I'll have a proper look at Gareth's foot later,' said *Doctor* Tom, masterfully.

Tom's masterfulness only served to make matters worse, but Tegan had touched a nerve and her sister was in serious denial. Deafening silence now filled the vehicle.



Tegan knew what she had to do.

## Chapter 23

### UFO

*Radar reconnaissance NRO Washington DC*

‘A report has just come in from LA weather radar. UFO detected, moving at approximately 150 knots, over route 125,’ said Bill.

‘Where’s that?’ said Bob.

‘East of San Diego, I think,’ said Bill.

‘Any sightings?’ asked Bob.

‘Visual reports of a large winged creature,’ said Bill.

‘No, not again! Better inform control,’ said Bob

‘Any point in getting the F18’s up there,’ asked Bill.

‘No point, it’s off the radar now. Disappeared somewhere over the Laguna mountains,’ said Bob.

‘Where’s that?’ asked Bill.

It had been a typical boring day for Bill and Bob. This short-lived incident did nothing to alleviate the usual eye strain and double vision.

## Chapter 24

### Tom's plan

Fruit Tree Cove seemed an ideal place to hide a dragon. A freshwater reservoir in a sheltered valley, surrounded by a dense forest – where could be better. To get there involved negotiating several miles of rough dirt tracks, enough to test the suspension of any vehicle. It was fortunate that they possessed sturdy bolt cutters as many padlocked gates blocked their way. Fruit Tree Cove was a difficult place to find in daylight let alone in the dark, but everyone had complete faith in Tom's navigational skills. However, after an hour and a half to do a twenty-mile journey, they were having their doubts.

Finally, they reached the secluded reservoir and then Arawn spotted something huge, vague and glistening in the weak light of the obscured moon.

It was Brathen.

Tom positioned the vehicle at the water's edge with the headlights shining toward Brathen. Instinctively, she protested with grunts and plumes of fire from her nostrils, but then she sensed the Queens within the metal box on wheels and instantly calmed.

In the headlights, they could see that she was shielding something with her enormous wings. Between her legs and beneath her scaly chest, something was moving.

It was a baby Dragon.

'Oh look, she's laid her egg and it's hatched!' cheered Queen Tegan.

'Girl or boy?' asked Gareth.

'Let's go and ask her,' said Queen Caron.

As with all creatures, no matter how ugly or menacing, their children are always cute and adorable. Brathen's child was no exception. A fully formed dragon so small and vulnerable but as yet unable to fly and breathe fire.

The Queens were overawed with such a unique creation of nature. They gently touched Brathen's long scaly neck and read her thoughts.

'He's beautiful,' *thought* Queen Tegan.

‘Absolutely adorable,’ *thought* Queen Caron.

‘It’s a he, and he’s gorgeous,’ shouted Tegan.

The queens stepped back and the men carefully approached.

‘Don’t get any closer, it’s feeding time for the youngster,’ said Queen Caron.

They were all on a learning curve. Even the Queens didn’t know all that much about the anatomy of a dragon. Apparently, somewhere between the scales of her belly, were her teats. Exactly how many and whereabouts, was a mystery, but the baby dragon seemed to know exactly where to go for his feed.

‘I think, he needs a name. We can’t keep calling him ‘Baby dragon,’ said Queen Caron.

‘Dragon names are a spontaneous thing. A perfect name for him will materialise when the time is right,’ said Gareth.

‘Brathen’s predecessor, Dirchef, was a great and noble dragon. How about Dirchef junior?’ suggested Tegan.

‘No, he will be named in the fullness of time,’ said Arawn wisely.

Albeit the most fearsome creatures to have ever evolved on planet earth, it was a truly enlightening sight. Even when mother nature pulls out all the stops to create something so formidable, she remains ever consistent with a baby suckling on his mother.

‘Now we have another problem,’ said Tegan.

‘You don’t say,’ said Arawn.

There was nothing they could do until sunrise so the five of them tried their best to catch a few winks sleep in the people carrier. As to be expected, this wasn’t easy. Arawn snored loud enough to wake the devil and the seats didn’t recline into anything remotely comfortable. Eventually, morning came and a plan of action had formed – mainly in Tom’s mind – he got the least sleep.

‘We need something sturdy for Brathen to carry the baby in. I suggest that Gareth and I go back into the city and find something suitable,’ said Tom.

‘Can’t Gareth and Arawn go instead?’ suggested Queen Caron.

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ snapped Queen Tegan.

To Arawn, it seemed a perfectly reasonable suggestion, but a perfect husband as he was, he wasn’t particularly cut out for lateral thinking, the Kingdom rarely called for it. Of course, Caron had an ulterior

motive for Tom remaining behind, but Arawn was exceptionally naive.

The disappointment in Caron's face was clear for all to see as the people carrier drove off with her new love within.

As they would probably be gone for hours, the Queens decided to use some time up and go for a swim in the clear sparkling water of the reservoir. It was not becoming for a Queen, of any province or Kingdom to pong. They took all their clothes off.

'No peeking at my sister,' shouted Caron to Arawn.

Arawn was puzzled for two reasons: firstly, naked, they were identical, right down to the merest detail and two, he had seen Tegan naked several times when she was pretending to be her sister. No matter, he turned his attention to making a shelter using surrounding rocks, twigs and turf, just in case it rained, or if they were attacked. Survival and combat skills were his forte.

Marutuk people were used to having dragons around. The Queens and Arawn were no exception and were completely oblivious to enormous, menacing Brathen within a few feet of them. Brathen was also oblivious to the humans nearby. She was understandably preoccupied with her handsome new son.

The water was cold but refreshing. In such circumstances, they were children again, screaming, laughing, splashing each other and in the process, they were cleaning themselves. Tegan desperately wanted to know the extent of her sister's romantic liaisons with Tom. Caron wanted to know all about being evil and if, just once in a while, it was beneficial. However, they talked about other things instead: their childhood, Grandpa and how wonderful it was to be Queens of a Kingdom.

At first, the journey was quiet. Gareth didn't know what to say to a qualified Netherworld doctor. Tom didn't know what to say to a prince of a magical kingdom. The silence was getting awkward. Eventually, Gareth had something to ask,

'What's the plan then?'

'We need to find something to carry the baby in, something Brathen can easily hold on to,' said Tom.

'Ideally a hot air balloon basket. I know where there was one for the taking,' said Gareth.

'That'll do, where?' asked Tom.

'It's seven thousand miles away. It's probably been sold on eBay by now.'

Gareth realised that he wasn't being particularly helpful. Tom gave him a critical look.

'I have thought of something, but we'll need lots of rope, a more practical vehicle and a trailer,' said Tom.

There was a pause before Gareth asked a more pertinent question,

'Why are you doing all this for us? Is it Queen Caron? You've fallen in love with her, haven't you?'

Tom took a while to reply.

'Yes, I adore her. I've never had such strong feelings for someone before. I'm trying to handle it, but she occupies every moment of my thoughts.'

'Well, you do realise that you have an irresolvable problem. Caron is married to Arawn and no one has ever separated or divorced in the Kingdom,' said Gareth factually.

'But no, I'm not helping you because of Caron. This is, by far the best adventure I've ever had. It certainly beats patching up drunks on a Saturday night.'

Another bout of silence followed. It was now Tom's turn to ask a question.

'What's it like, living in the Kingdom? Don't you get bored without technology and all that comes with it?'

'I used to live here, in the Netherworld, as we call it. I was chosen as a guide by an organisation called the Protectorate.'

'Protectorate? Sounds like the Mafia,' said Tom.

'Far from it. They date back many thousands of years. They were formed to protect the world's remaining dragons. I took the bold step of leaving behind everything in the Netherworld and starting a new life in the Kingdom. Not for one second have I ever regretted my decision.'

'What about any family you left behind?'

'All passed away. Perhaps things would have been different if I had parents or brothers and sisters.'

Suddenly, Gareth was distracted and lowered his window. The beating of helicopter rotor blades reverberated far above them.

'If I'm not mistaken, that's the sound of a bell jet ranger. I believe they're on to us,' said Gareth.

'Yes, I expected as much. We better get a move on,' said Tom with an element of excitement.

Their first port of call was a large supermarket.

'What do we want from here?' asked Gareth.

'An important part of the plan. It's suspicious if we both go in. Go to the customer service desk and say you've lost a set of car keys. Ask if anyone has handed them in,' instructed Tom.

'Why? We haven't lost any keys,' grumbled Gareth.

'Just do it. Toyota, if possible, if not, the newest looking ones they have. They usually have a few. Appear grateful, and quit your moaning. As you pointed out, I'm helping you, not the other way around.'

'OK, OK!' snapped Gareth.

Five minutes later, Gareth returned with a set of Toyota car keys.

'Excellent, the first part of the plan!' cheered Tom.

'Now what?'

'We need to tour the car lots and find something rugged with a towing hitch.'

After driving around a few blocks, they finally found a used car lot which happened to have a butch-looking truck on the forecourt.

'Perfect!' said Tom.

'Surely, we're not going to buy a vehicle, are we?' bleated Gareth.

'Stay here, keep your head down. When I go for a test drive, follow me, OK?' directed Tom.

Gareth had come to the conclusion that he was best just going with the flow and letting Tom get on with whatever he was getting on with.

'Hi, I'm interested in the blue 4x4. I've had a look around it, seems OK. Alright if I take it for a test drive?' said Tom to the car lot salesman.

'Yeah, er, sure, I'll get the keys and my jacket,' said the salesman.

Moments later, the salesman returned with a key attached to a tag –

and his jacket.

‘OK if I take it around the block. I’ll leave you my keys, I’m in that people carrier over there,’ said Tom calmly.

Now, with some kind of security being left – the keys Gareth had claimed from the supermarket, the salesman was happy for the potential customer to go off on his own. He hung his jacket back up.

‘It has the sought-after V6 diesel engine. The previous owner fitted limited-slip diffs. It’s a go-anywhere vehicle,’ chanted the salesman.

‘Right, excellent, thanks,’ said Tom.

Tom was beginning to wonder if he’d missed his true vocation. It seemed that stealing cars was much easier than healing people. Of course, he wasn’t stealing the 4x4, he was merely borrowing it. This was an important detail!

Gareth nervously followed Tom in the 4x4. Considering he hadn’t driven for several years, he wasn’t doing too badly. Eventually, the 4x4 and then the people carrier pulled onto the car park of a large tool store. It was the same tool store that Tom had visited the previous day. Requirements this time were a coil of thick rope and the hire of a trailer. Twenty minutes later, a substantial twin axle trailer complete with ramps was hooked onto the back of the 4x4 vehicle.

‘I wish you’d share your plan with me,’ pleaded Gareth.

‘It’s not complicated, all we need now is an industrial wheelie bin. There should be several around the back of this place. Go and empty one out and bring it over to the trailer.’

‘What? Just tip the rubbish over the floor?’ bleated Gareth.

‘Well, you could empty it into another bin if you want and sweep up after?’

‘OK, I’ll do that,’ said Gareth.

‘Look, you numbskull, it might have escaped your notice, but we are a little pushed for time! Go and get the bin! I have some work to do with the rope,’ barked Tom.

A short time later, Gareth emerged from the back of the store with a galvanised steel industrial wheelie bin. Tom gave a despairing look. Plastic, which most of them usually are, would have been preferred, a metal one was twice as heavy.

After both of them struggled with the heavy bin, getting it onto the trailer, they set off, again in separate vehicles. Tom was beginning to wonder if all men in the Kingdom were as bungling and simple-



minded as Gareth. Perhaps he was being unfair.

Perhaps his true colours were finally showing through.

## Chapter 25

### Crazy sister

Boredom was now setting in. The Queens had had their splash about and were now refreshed, odour free and dressed. Arawn had finished constructing his shelter, ready for when it rained. Over a hundred stones had been skimmed across the water by each Queen and Arawn had sharpened several long twigs into a point with his new Swiss Army knife. He really had missed having one by his side. Caron and Tegan were doing their best to avoid the subject, but it was expected any time soon.

‘Don’t you feel guilty, carrying on like you are with Tom, in front of Arawn?’ asked Tegan.

‘He can take it, he’s a knight,’ snapped Caron.

‘That’s not the point, he has feelings,’ said Tegan.

‘And what do you know, two-timer! No, I’d put it stronger than that – adulterer!’

‘That’s unfair, you know I was possessed with evil.’

‘Yes, but you enjoyed it, didn’t you, having your wicked way with a... *superior* man!’ sneered Caron.

‘Superior?!’

‘Yes, you know what I mean. Fit, handsome, a six-pack instead of a beer gut!’

‘If that’s what you think makes a man superior. Oh look, he’s sharpening a stick into a point, just like a caveman!’ jibed Tegan.

‘And what inspiring talents does Gareth happen to possess exactly? Ironing? Trainspotting? Admit it, he’s so boring! You’re just jealous that Tom fancies me, not you!’ chided Caron.

Tegan was now fuming – she needed to be fuming to do what she was about to do.

‘Jealous? I’ll show you how jealous I am. Arawn, petal, could you come over here for a moment please,’ said Queen Tegan sweetly.

Arawn grunted a little and walked over, still holding his sticks and his

knife.

‘Hmm, nice pointy sticks! Could I borrow your knife for a second?’

It happened in the blink of an eye. Tegan took firm hold of the knife and thrust it, heavily into Arawn’s chest. Arawn glanced down at the knife lodged in his chest for a moment and then collapsed to the ground. Caron was naturally stunned, shocked and then delirious.

‘What the hell have you done!? You’re still possessed!’ screamed Caron.

‘Better get healing quick, before he dies,’ said Tegan, calmly and coldly.

Caron knew exactly what to do, but she was in a state of shock. She dearly wanted Tom by her side to comfort her and give her confidence, but it seemed all she had was an evil sister for guidance.

‘Better hurry up. I reckon with an injury like that, he has only minutes to live,’ said Tegan, indifferently.

‘I can’t, I can’t!’ Caron screamed.

It was an awful thought, but unavoidably, it flashed across Caron’s mind. It could be the ideal solution – a way out of an unresolvable problem. She couldn’t deny it. If Arawn died this way, through no fault of her own, she would be free to marry Tom and be with him for the rest of her life. Her thoughts were muddled. Hysteria was setting in.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake!’ snapped Tegan.

It wasn’t exactly the way Tegan had planned, but time was dangerously running out. She pulled the knife out of Arawn’s chest and slit the palm of her hand. Hastily, she ripped open Arawn’s shirt and merged her blood with his. What followed now was becoming almost routine. Arawn’s flesh rapidly burnt away to the depths of the wound, exposing ribs and all manner of internal organs. Then, suddenly, the large, charred mess of sinew and flesh began to close in, growing ever smaller. Finally, after a few minutes, Arawn’s chest was as good as new, although he remained unconscious.

‘Over to you now,’ said Tegan forcefully.

This was something Caron could do, after all, he was her husband. A half-hearted kiss predictably turned into a long amorous and passionate kiss. By this time, Arawn was well and truly conscious and both were well and truly in love with each other – again. Eventually, with great fortitude, they reluctantly parted, mainly because Caron needed to give Tegan a piece of her mind.

‘What the hell! What do you think you’re playing at? You nearly killed my husband!’ growled Caron.

‘Come off it! Nowhere near nearly, he was never in any danger. It was something I had to do,’ said Tegan calmly.

‘Something you had to do? Are you deranged? Stab my husband? You’re still evil as sin!’ screamed Caron.

‘No, not at all. When you’ve finished ranting, have you noticed anything?’ said Tegan, calmly.

‘Noticed? I’ve noticed I’ve got a crazy sister!’

‘Who do you love?’ asked Tegan.

‘Arawn of course, with all of my heart!’ snapped Caron.

‘Not Tom then?’

It hadn’t immediately registered, but Tom no longer carried the candle. Nice chap, yes, but no one could come close to Arawn. Her love for her husband was well and truly back, reset and how it should be. Her love for Tom had fizzled away in a lingering moment during her passionate kiss with Arawn.

‘Oh my gosh, no, not at all. What must I have been thinking?’ cringed Caron.

‘Took me a while to realise it, but the prince charming kiss after our blood has done its work must be like a love potion. My blood healed Tom, but you did the kissing bit. From that moment, you were both suddenly infatuated with each other,’ explained Tegan.

‘So, you’re not evil then?’

‘No, I am your sister and I love you to bits. Don’t you ever forget it!’ said Tegan.

The Queens hugged each other and a few tears formed. Arawn was somewhat bemused with recent events, but no matter, he was as right as rain now – he could get on with sharpening his sticks.

Dragon Brathen had largely ignored the incident, there were far more important matters to attend to. Her youngster was hungry and required a good feed. She even ignored several wailing police cars and army vehicles as they approached her in a cloud of dust.

‘Oh, dear. Arawn, we’ve got company!’ shouted Queen Caron.

## Chapter 26

### Tom's hunch

For the last twenty miles, Gareth had diligently followed Tom in the 4x4 vehicle with the attached trailer loaded with a wheelie bin. He had no idea where they were going, although, not for the want of asking. It appeared to be Tom's mission and he wasn't sharing anything. Easy-going Gareth was taking it all in his stride. In a way, this made him a stronger person than Tom could ever be.

Suddenly the borrowed blue 4x4 came to a shuddering halt and Tom hastily jumped out. He raced up to Gareth. Naturally, Gareth thought he'd done something to irritate him. Perhaps he was driving too close, or too far behind, and was about to receive a reprimand. He was prepared.

'Gareth... I'm ashamed. I don't know what came over me. It's like I was a different person, immersed in some kind of devilry. Suddenly, it's just lifted. I've been an absolute cretin, I'm so sorry.'

'So, are you going to tell me where we're going now?' said Gareth warily.

'Yes of course, sorry! I've got a hunch that when we get back, there will be unwelcomed company, blocking the way. The helicopter you heard suggests that the police and military are on our trail. I thought if we approach Fruit Tree Cove from the rear, using the mountain track...'

'Hence the 4x4?'

'Exactly! Well, you can work out the rest.'

'Very smart! And the wheelie bin and rope, a makeshift basket for Brathen to carry her baby?'

'Exactly. I just hope it won't be too heavy for her,' said Tom, now trying not to be critical.

'Trust me, it won't be. I chose a metal bin just in case any bullets start flying,' said Gareth casually.

'Hmm, it seems that I have completely underestimated you,' humbled Tom.

‘Don’t worry, it happens to the best of people,’ said Gareth calmly.

It was as though Tom had emerged from some kind of spell and essentially, he had. Naturally, Gareth had figured it all out.

‘I thought we could leave the people-carrier around here somewhere?’ suggested Tom.

‘Yes, out of the way and plenty of trees to conceal it,’ said Gareth, then pausing for a moment. ‘As a matter of interest, how are your feelings towards Queen Caron?’

‘Feelings? Strange question. She’s a nice person and all that, but not really my type, why do you ask?’ puzzled Tom, puzzled.

‘Nothing, just wondered.’

## Chapter 27

### Precious load

Several police cars and military vehicles gathered at a safe distance away from the formidable dragon. Tegan, Caron and Arawn wisely retreated to Arawn's makeshift shelter. For now, it was a stand-off. No bullets had been fired and no angry men shouting on loud hailers. Clearly, they were waiting for something.

A mile or so away, Gareth and Tom pulled up and watched three large battle grey chinook helicopters with twin rotors, thundering right over the top of them. Gareth lowered his window.

'Don't often see three CH 47's together. Quite an impressive sight – when not in anger,' said Gareth casually.

'Obviously in anger, judging by that net hanging from one of them. As a matter of interest, how heavy is a dragon?' asked Tom.

'At a rough estimate, I would say Brathen is at least fifteen tons. If they intend to carry her in the net, they're seriously pushing it with only three Chinooks,' said Gareth factually.

'Obviously, not done their research then,' said Tom.

Further along the valley at Fruit Tree Cove, the mountainsides began to reverberate with the beating of six rotors. Louder and louder the pulsating sound became and then suddenly, they were in sight of the reservoir. The chinook with the net approached first. Carefully and slowly, it positioned itself right over the top of Brathen.

'Brathen!!' yelled Caron and Tegan together. 'Move!!'

Up until this point, Brathen was still immersed in being a mother with her baby who was constantly fidgeting under her mother's protective wing. She hadn't reacted to the noise of the helicopter. It was just another flying object very much like another dragon, only far uglier.

The reinforced net was about to be dropped.

Without hesitation, Brathen picked up her baby with her talons and carefully deposited him with the Queens. Then she shot up into the sky with a few flaps of her enormous wings. Instinctively, she recognised that it was the same kind of flying object that had snared

her before. She clearly remembered the tremendous pain and discomfort of being crushed and confined in the Netherworld's net. Now, it was payback time. With one almighty outpouring of flaming breath, the helicopter was on fire – mainly the engines. They screamed, coughed, spluttered and then died, with flames and smoke engulfing most of the helicopter. Immediately, the brick-shaped machine began to plunge out of the sky. No doubt the skilled pilot managed to control the descent as best he could but, seconds later, it collided with the ground with considerable force. Brathen now turned to the other two helicopters just for spite. This time, a volley of gunfire spayed out of the helicopters and from several military weapons on the ground. Of course, Brathen was largely invulnerable to bullets with her harder than steel scales covering her body and head. However, her wings had a more fragile construction. She flamed another of the helicopters with her breath, this time one of the engines exploded, damaging a rotor. The pilot had no option but to lose height quickly and thump heavily into the ground. Wisely, the third and last helicopter was not hanging around for similar treatment and flew off as quickly as it could into the distance. Two very expensive helicopters were now firmly embedded in the ground, buckled, bashed and inoperative.

The military was enraged. Eighty million dollars' worth of helicopters, now no more than scrap metal. All the occupants of the Chinooks had miraculously survived, but this was certainly no consolation. If they weren't before, the military was now at war with a dragon.

Brathen attempted to close in on the Queens, Arawn and her new child, huddled in the make-shift shelter, but the gunfire was too fierce, even for a dragon.

'Go and find Gareth!' both queens shouted above the random gunfire.

Brathen was hardly going to argue, not that she ever did or could. Naturally, she was concerned about leaving her child, but her mistresses had given her an order, she had to obey. Almost instantly, her powerful wings thrust her high in the sky, out of the range of the bullets. She circled for a few moments and with her exceptionally keen vision, spotted the blue 4x4 vehicle with a trailer attached. Of course, she didn't know it was a 4x4 or that it was a trailer behind it or that the colour was blue, but she did sense a Marutukian inside.

It's not often that you find an enormous dragon blocking your way. Tom slammed on the brakes which caused the wheelie bin to hurtle to the front of the trailer with a loud clang. Gareth jumped out and ran over to Brathen.



‘What’s up, old girl?’ asked Gareth, calmly stroking her long neck.

Of course, Brathen couldn’t speak or even transfer thoughts to Gareth, he wasn’t of royal blood, but Gareth immediately saw the bullet holes in her wings.

‘Is she alright?’ asked Tom.

‘Yes, stronger than an ox, but judging by the bullet holes, it looks like the Queens and Gareth are in trouble,’ said Gareth.

‘Time to put plan wheelie-bin into operation then,’ said Tom glibly.

Brathen was clearly agitated – huffing and stomping the ground while Gareth and Tom set to work.

The bolt cutters turned out to be a very useful tool. First, the wheelie bin lid was chopped off at the hinges and then several lengths of rope were cut and attached to the side handles and wheels. Finally, all the lengths of ropes were tied together to form a handle for Brathen’s talons to grasp.

It was now up to Brathen, she was eager to leave, no doubt worrying about her son.

‘OK girl, down to you now,’ said Gareth, affectionately.

Despite being a dragon, she seemed to know exactly what to do. She’d done a stint of fetching supplies in her early days, so grabbing ropes and carrying things was second nature.

The wheelie bin swung violently, hanging from her talons as she launched herself rapidly into the air. In no time at all, high in the sky, she had Fruit Tree Cove in her sights.

Meanwhile, the military and police had the Queens, Arawn and the baby dragon pinned down. It was only a matter of time. They were outnumbered and out-weaponed. The military had spotted the baby dragon, this was now their supreme goal. The benefits of possessing a real flourishing dragon, to study and exhibit, were incalculable.

However, they hadn’t counted on the mother returning.

Brathen swooped down and deposited the wheelie bin right next to the makeshift shelter. Immediately, the gunfire resumed. The soldier and police had strict instructions not to fire on the young dragon, but Marutukians and mature dragons were justifiable targets. While the bin was loaded with three people and one baby dragon, Brathen did what dragons are best at – flame-throwing. The bullets continued but many soldiers got burnt and several vehicles ignited. Countless bullets hit Brathen and bounced off, but her wings continued to suffer. To

her, they were like pinpricks, but every pinprick made her wings less efficient.

Naturally, it was Arawn's job to lift the baby dragon into the wheelie bin. For a youngster, he was surprisingly heavy and difficult to handle, but neither protested.

'Crouch down inside!' yelled Arawn.

It was time to leave. Brathen had to break off from retaliation and grab hold of the wheelie bin ropes. It was now Arawn's turn to retaliate. Despite being ridiculed for it, there was a reason why he had spent his time sharpening several large twigs into a point with his knife. Arawn was a knight and a warrior – albeit from a tiny Kingdom where there were never any battles. His skill with a spear was second to none and a sharpened twig was the next best thing. In the time it took Brathen to fly over to the wheelie bin, grab hold of the rope and lift the bin, with its passengers, high into the air, Arawn had spent all his sharpened twigs. Everyone hit their target. They weren't fashioned to kill, but they were certainly painful when they pierced fleshy human parts. Several bullets pinged off the metal wheelie bin, but fortunately, none penetrated.

The Queens, Arawn and the baby dragon were now high in the sky, in an industrial wheelie bin, hanging from Brathen's talons. They certainly couldn't be classed as safe and secure, but they were certainly safer than being under fire from the military and police.

## Chapter 28

### Misplaced vehicle

Brathen knew exactly where to go, her homing skills were better than a pigeon's. Thankfully it wasn't far as it was a very heavy load with three humans and a baby dragon. Her peppered wings didn't help matters, making her work harder to keep in the air. The 4x4 vehicle, attached to the trailer, appeared in the distance. Gareth and Tom waved for all they were worth.

Brathen landed the crowded wheelie bin with an uncomfortable bump and then landed herself close by. Immediately, she began to huff and puff, eager to have her son with her once more, under her care and protection. Tegan ran over to Gareth and gave him a tight hug. Caron ran over to Tom and apologised for her inappropriate behaviour. Tom was slightly bemused, completely unaware of any impropriety. It seemed that the Kingdom's magic had *temporarily* altered his perception of recent events.

'Oh, poor, poor Brathen, look at the state of her wings,' cried Tegan.

Caron inspected the numerous bullet holes, it looked like Brathen's wings had a bad case of woodworm.

'What, the hell are we going to do? Brathen can't fly seven thousand miles in that state!' bleated Caron.

The holes will heal in time, but that's something we don't have,' said Gareth.

'Won't your miraculous blood help? It certainly worked miracles on me,' suggested Tom.

It was something they had to try and quickly. It wouldn't be long before the police and military would be on their tails. Both Queens pricked their index fingers with Arawn's sharp knife. Caron smeared her blood on one particular hole in Brathen's wing and waited for a reaction. Nothing seemed to happen for a while, but then, suddenly, before their eyes, the hole quickly began to shrink in size. Moments later, the hole was gone. It wasn't the effect everyone was accustomed to. The stage of burning flesh before the healing process seemed to have been bypassed. No matter, it appeared that royal blood could even heal dragons.

Without hesitation, Caron and Tegan began dabbing their weeping fingers all over Brathen's enormous wings. They had very little time. It was now or never. Arawn cautiously removed the baby dragon from Brathen's care and placed him back in the wheelie bin.

It was time for Brathen to leave. Caron gently caressed her long neck while giving her instructions.

'Take your son and fly home and don't eat any humans on the way, only cattle and sheep. Off you go now, Petal, we'll see you soon.'

In dragon fashion, Brathen acknowledged her mistress's instructions, even though she was certain her name wasn't Petal. Instinctively, she poked her head into the wheelie bin to inspect her child and then began to prepare herself for the long flight. She examined her repaired wings and then snorted a little fire to warm them up. With her talons firmly gripping the ropes attached to the wheelie bin, she raised her outstretched wings.

As usual, when a dragon the size of Brathen takes off, it causes a significant amount of turbulence – and dust. This time, it was no exception. The backdraft whipped grit into everyone's eyes and before they could see properly, Brathen was out of sight and heading home.

There was no time to waste, Gareth was last to climb into the cramped interior of the 4x4 vehicle. Before he had shut the door properly, Tom was already in second gear, racing up the rough mountain track. They all had the distinct feeling that they weren't out of the woods yet. In fact, a few minutes later, they were entering *the woods*. Hopefully, it was the same woods where Gareth had left the people carrier.

Unfortunately, one tree looked like another and the rough track had no distinguishing features. Tom and Gareth were convinced that they were in the right area and the people carrier was somewhere very close by. Perhaps it was a mistake to hide it. It didn't help that the people carrier was green – leaf green.

'Where the heck is it!?' raged Tom.

They hadn't got time for this inconvenience.

'Can't we just use this vehicle?' asked Arawn.

To Arawn, a true Marutukian, one vehicle was just like another – wheels, seats and doors.

'No, we can't!' retorted Tom. 'This vehicle is borrowed, the people carrier is hired. Big difference. They have my details. If I don't return it, I'll be paying for it for the next ten years... on my meagre pay.'

No one said anything, what could they say? Hopefully, they were

going back to the Kingdom, away from all Netherworld responsibilities and obligations. Tom wasn't.

'Hang on, what's that over there, behind those bushes!?' shouted Tegan.

Thankfully, it was the green people carrier, more or less camouflaged in the green shrubbery.

'I suspect, at any moment now, the skies will be full of helicopters, looking for us,' said Gareth factually.

The 4x4 was camouflaged, as best as they could, under the bushes next to the people carrier.

Suddenly a helicopter passed right overhead and began circling.

'Well, one thing's for certain, we can't go anywhere for a while, they'll spot us straight away,' said Gareth.

There was no choice, all they could do was sit tight, try to relax and take a nap. At least, now they had two vehicles to go at but neither was particularly designed for anything other than sitting in.

It was six hours and nightfall before the skies had finally cleared of beating helicopters. Tom started the engine and slowly backed the people carrier out of its hidey-hole leaving several twigs and branches behind. He decided not to switch on the headlights, just in case there were any radio-controlled drones stealthily hovering about.

Tom used all his skills to weave in and out of the ruts and fallen branches in almost total darkness. After a few hair-raising, spine-torturing miles, they reached proper smooth roads. It was a relief, to say the least. Tom could finally switch on the headlights.

'I think... we're in the clear,' said Tom cautiously.

'For now!' said Gareth. 'Where are we going?'

'Need to call in somewhere – clear my conscience.'

Several miles later, the people-carrier pulled up across the road from a familiar used car lot.

'Caron, do me a favour, would you give these keys to the salesman? Tell him it broke down ten miles east of Fruit Tree Cove... Oh, and ask him if he wouldn't mind returning the trailer to Ginghams tool store,' said Tom.

Queen Caron couldn't possibly refuse.

## Chapter 29

### A long bus ride

Apparently, they had been successful. The dying Queen had been saved and Brathen had been freed. Some of it was down to Tom and a lot of it was down to magic. All that was left to do now, was to get back to the Kingdom – a mere 7000 miles away.

‘You do realise they’ll be looking out for you at the airport,’ said Tom.

‘Well, there’s no other way to get home!’ snapped Arawn.

‘Ideally, you need to get to another State.’

‘Anywhere in mind,’ asked Gareth.

‘You could make your way to Texas. The heat won’t be on so much there,’ said Tom.

‘And how do you suggest we get to Texas?’ ranted Caron. ‘I don’t suppose you’d take us?’

It was a cheeky ask. Tom had every right to decline.

‘Sorry, I need to get back to reality and back to work. Somehow, that apartment has to be paid for. Greyhound buses run from San Diego all the way to San Antonio. There’s an airport there.’

‘Exactly how far are we talking about?’ asked Tegan apprehensively.

‘About a thousand miles,’ said Tom casually.

‘A thousand miles!!’ they all chanted.

After the initial shock, they had to concede. A very long bus trip was the only way. Tom took them to the bus depot.

Naturally, they were going to miss Tom. He had gone beyond the call of duty, put his life in danger, risked several prison sentences and fallen in and out of love. He had also been fatally shot in the chest but saved by a Queen’s royal blood. Certain they were in his debt, but he was in their debt, especially Caron, for his life. On the plus side, it had been by far, the best adventure he had ever had. He had seen dragons, witnessed magic and learnt how to become a car thief. You don’t get that kind of experience on an adventure weekend.

‘That’s it then. I don’t suppose I’ll ever see you lot again,’ said Tom, trying not to be emotional.

Gareth shook his hand and man-hugged. Arawn shook his hand but didn’t hug. It wasn’t the kind of thing warriors did. Then Tegan hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. Finally, it was Caron’s turn, she also hugged him.

‘No lippy business! You know what happened last time!’ jested Tegan.

‘Sisters, eh? Can’t take them anywhere,’ said Caron to Tom. She kissed him lingeringly on the cheek and then, when no one was watching, placed a small parcel in his hand.

‘Something to help you with your apartment,’ whispered Caron softly.

Nothing more was said, what could be said? The Queens, Arawn and Gareth walked into the depot occasionally turning around and waving. Tom got back in the people carrier and decided to sit awhile. He would never, ever forget his four new friends. Surely, nothing in his life could ever come close to his time with the Marutukians. He was now on his own. He opened up the little parcel. Inside was the biggest diamond he had ever seen. It had a little note with it.

*‘Thank you, with all our hearts. Love Queen Caron.’*

Something stirred deep inside him. Certain buried memories came flooding back. Totally out of character, he began to weep. How could he have forgotten that he was so deeply in love? She was, without doubt, the most wonderful person he had ever met and the thought that he could never see her again tore his heart in two. His stomach churned and he felt awful, but strangely, he felt wonderful at the same time.

And then, suddenly, everything was alright. The fever had passed.

The momentary feeling of being in love so deeply, so intensely, was no less than a gift. Once again, Caron was not really his type, but he remembered the feelings. One day he hoped he would meet the right person and have those feelings again.

If he ever doubted it before, he now knew that there was always potential for life to be wonderful.

## Chapter 30

### All lies

Arawn thought the flight in, was bad enough, but the bus, coach, whatever the Nertherworlder's called it, was beyond every level of discomfort he had ever experienced. To be fair, the seats were quite comfortable and reclined to some degree, and there were plenty of refreshment stops, but it seemed as though the journey carried on forever. Sitting down for nearly two days was enough to give everyone piles, something Arawn had never experienced.

Finally, they arrived in another State and an altogether hotter climate. The following day they would book a flight to take them as far as possible in the direction of the Kingdom. For now, though, all they wanted to do was lie on a comfortable bed. They booked two adjacent rooms in a nearby hotel and settled in for the night. Naturally, the two rooms were not at all what royalty was used to. They were a tenth the size of the castle's and the beds were hard and uncomfortable. However, relaxing on the bed and watching television, was a chance to recover from the horrendous last two days of travelling. Being identical twins, they always tended to do exactly the same things, which at that moment in time amounted to watching the same TV channel. The News was on:

'For the very latest breaking news from Fruit Tree Cove, we go over to Bernie who is at the scene... Good evening, Bernie, looks like a delightful spot there,' said the newsreader.

*'It is now, very peaceful... but as we know, it certainly wasn't, a couple of days ago. This video footage has just been released. It clearly shows the horrendous attack on the soldiers and police...'*

The TV proceeded to show Brathen attacking the helicopters with her flaming breath.

*'As you can see, it was an unprovoked attack. The rampaging dragon had no pity on the brave militaries. The beast's flames, ignited both helicopters, forcing them to crash-land with the loss of dozens of lives.'*

The video continued with both helicopters in flames and falling out of the sky, but ended short of them reaching the ground. It was clearly edited to bias the viewing public.



*'The beast then set upon the ground forces with all its wrath. Many were burnt alive,'* concluded Bernie – without any supporting video footage.

'How awful. Any news on the creature? Has it been destroyed yet?' asked the newsreader.

*'We don't as yet know, but we can be certain that all is being done to eliminate this abhorrent evil creature,'* said Bernie.

'I do hope so. That's what we pay all our taxes for. Any news on the four fugitives?'

*'No, they're still on the run, but I shouldn't think it will be long before they're apprehended and severely dealt with.'*

'I should say so, they have a lot to answer for: Two poor nurses viciously assaulted. Two hospital staff seriously injured. A whole wing of a hospital burnt to the ground. A kidnapped doctor. Four staff at the zoo seriously injured. Four dogs killed. A police officer on the critical list. And the list goes on. They need to be caught quickly before others suffer at their hands.'

*'All I can say is it's a good job we had the sense to destroy the rest of the dragons and the kingdom.'*

'No truer word spoken. Goodness knows what horrors would have been unleashed on our peaceful world if we hadn't. Anyway, moving on to the rest of the news: Another four more people were shot and mugged last night across the city making a total of thirty-two this month. The advice given is to keep your gun on you at all times and ensure that it's loaded. There's a dramatic increase in vehicle theft thanks to a new scam. More on the story, over to our reporter Clifton who is at a downtown car lot to explain. So, Clifton, tell us more...' continued the newsreader.

Predictably, it was full-on panic stations. As is the way with identical twins, at the same instant, both couples left their rooms and collided in the corridor.

'We can't talk out here, quick, in our room,' said Gareth.

'It was a pack of lies. It didn't happen like that,' shrieked Tegan.

'It seems that they've juiced up the story a little,' said Gareth.

'A little!?' shrieked Caron.

'Now what do we do, leave the hotel?' groaned Arawn.

'No, best stay here and sit tight. I'm pretty certain we're safe for now. I'm sure the girl on reception didn't recognise us, she hardly looked

up, too occupied texting on her phone,' said Gareth.

'We'll have to stay here till morning. After all, where else can we go at this late hour?' said Caron logically.

'Let's get a good night's sleep. We'll have clearer heads in the morning,' said Tegan.

They returned to their respective rooms and immediately turned their televisions off. Everyone was shattered and a good night's sleep would have been welcomed by all. However, annoyingly at around 3 am, their sleep was interrupted by someone calling on their room telephones. The phone in Caron's room rang first.

*'Get out quickly, they're coming for you. I'll be waiting in a motorhome parked across the road from the hotel. Knock three times,'* said the voice on the other end of the line, and then promptly hung up.

Then the phone in Tegan's room rang.

*'Get out quickly, they're coming for you. I'll be waiting in a motorhome parked across from the hotel. Knock four times,'* said the same mysterious voice, and then promptly hung up.

In record time – ten minutes, all four were standing outside a scruffy-looking motorhome, not knowing whether to knock three times or four times. In the end, Caron knocked hard on the door, three times and then one softer knock. After a while, the motorhome door opened and an elderly, Santa Claus looking man, dressed in pyjamas, filled the narrow doorway. He hastily ushered them in.

'I'm Alex and this is my wife Molly,' said the man. A thin, grey-haired woman, dressed in a long Victorian-style nightie, nodded at them.

'Please, find a seat, make yourselves comfortable,' said Molly, welcomingly.

'And whose side are you on exactly?' asked Queen Caron. It seemed to be a good question to ask.

'Gwenda has sent me,' said Alex curtly.

'Gwenda? I thought she said the Protectorate couldn't get involved?' said Gareth.

'Ordinarily yes, but on this occasion, she has been forced to make an exception,' said Alex.

'Forced?' quizzed Gareth.

'Yes. She feels as though you need a little... how can I put it, guidance.'

‘Guidance!?’ all four chanted.

‘Well, let’s face it, it’s a miracle that you haven’t been caught. I can only put it down to the incompetence of the police. First bit of advice, sticking together in a foursome everywhere, is a little conspicuous. You’re sticking out like a shining beacon. Two couples are much harder to track down.

‘We work better as a team,’ whimpered Arawn.

‘Face it, you wouldn’t be where you are now if it wasn’t for our top agent in LA.’

This was naturally, a bombshell. Agent in LA presumably meant Tom. Apparently, he was a member of the Protectorate.

‘Tom! One of you?!’ spluttered Caron.

‘Yes, one of our best men. I have something for you.’

Alex passed a small parcel to Caron.

‘He said it was a touching gesture, but unfortunately, rules are rules, Kingdom’s diamonds must stay in the Kingdom.’

Caron unwrapped the parcel. Inside was the diamond, accompanied by a brief note:

*Thank you for your gift, but I am forbidden to accept it. For an idyllic moment, the magic that stopped my heart aching deeply for you, faded, that was rewarding enough. All my love Tom.*

‘You do realise that that diamond is probably over thirty carats and worth about five million dollars. If it was put on the market, it would cause all kinds of ramifications. Speculators would want to know where it had come from, for a start,’ said Alex.

‘You gave him your belly button diamond?!’ said Tegan with horrified disbelief.

‘It was a token of thanks,’ said Caron, tersely.

‘At least that explains the timely appearance of the mobile phone,’ deduced Gareth.

The inside of the motorhome was tired and drab. The sparse battery-powered interior lighting wasn’t exactly dazzling, but at least it created a cosy atmosphere. Molly filled the kettle from a large bottle of water and placed it on the gas hob. Before the hob had ignited, there was a powerful smell of butane gas filling the small living space. Clearly, Alex and Molly were used to this life-threatening hazard.

‘Tea or coffee?’ asked Molly.

Even though it was the early hours of the morning, caffeinated drinks were welcomed. Besides, who could sleep now? Suddenly, the sound of several vehicles outside broke the night's silence. Alex cautiously parted the gaudy patterned curtains and peeked out of the small perspex window.

‘As predicted, here they come. Better turn the lights off. There is a slim chance that you may have to hide,’ said Alex.

‘Hide? Four of us? Where exactly?’ sputtered Gareth.

Alex proceeded to pull the carpet back to reveal storage compartments in the floor space.

‘Best to be prepared,’ said Molly with an unconcerned smile.

‘Can’t you just drive off?’ suggested Tegan.

‘Hmm, they’ll never learn, will they,’ said Alex to Molly. ‘The trick when on the run, is to never draw attention to yourselves. Not once, has the Protectorate lost track of you and we’re only a few hundred strong. As I’ve said, it’s a miracle that you haven’t been caught.’

Thanks to Alex’s timely warning, the police were hopefully on a wild goose chase. However, there were always security cameras. The receptionist played back the recording of the front entrance camera. It clearly showed the four wanted people, leaving the hotel and heading for the car park across the road.

Inevitably, there was a knock on the motorhome door. Alex purposely took his time to respond. It had to appear that he had been dragged from his bed. Of course, it also gave a chance for the fugitives, to hide under the floor.

‘Yes, who is it?!’ snapped Alex in an old shaky voice.

A chain prevented the door from opening more than an inch.

‘It’s the police. May we have a word please.’

Alex undid the chain and fully opened the door.

‘Who is it, Alex?’ quivered Molly from the direction of her bed.

‘It’s alright, dear. It’s the police.’

‘Have we been speeding?’ said Molly in a confused and trembling voice.

‘We’re after four dangerous people. They were staying in the hotel across the road. Video footage showed them heading in your direction. Have you heard or seen anything?’ said an officer.

‘Yes!’ snapped Alex. ‘They banged on the door – tried to break it in. They thumped the windows and then they started rocking the van. My wife was terrified. We get it all the time when we stay in town centres.’

‘You do realise that motorhomes are forbidden on this car park. Sorry, but I’ll have to move you on. Do you mind if I have a quick look inside?’ asked the officer.

‘Be my guest. Can’t offer you a cup of tea, the gas is out,’ snapped Alex.

The officer had a half-hearted look around and then left.

# Chapter 31

## Bandits

‘And that’s how it’s done,’ bragged Alex.

It was, perhaps, the only feasible way they were going to get back home – which happened to be somewhere within the Patagonian ice fields. By far, the most convenient way was by air, but on reflection, that was out of the question. No doubt they would be recognised in an instant at passport control. There was the train, but that involved buying tickets, countless passport checks and being on countless security cameras. Hiding in a motorhome was by far the most practical way of travelling across most of the American continent.

‘Two weeks, cooked up in here!’ groaned Queen Tegan.

‘It’ll drive me mad!’ groaned Queen Caron.

It seems that the Queens were in complete agreement, but Gareth showed a modicum of common sense – and gratefulness.

‘As far as I can see, it’s the only way we’re going to get home.’

‘Surely, we’re in no position to complain. We should be very grateful to Alex and Molly for offering to take us,’ said Arawn, putting the Queens in their places.

‘Yes, you’re right, sorry. Ignore me, I’m being completely unreasonable. It was me who got us into this mess after all,’ said Tegan.

‘It’s very kind of you,’ said Caron humbly.

The colossal journey that Alex had kindly offered to take them encompassed most of Latin America.

Alex made a start at the driving while everyone else tried to snatch a little shut-eye. Despite first impressions, it turned out to be an adequately sized motorhome: a six-berth complete with a shower/toilet compartment, a very basic kitchen area, a lounge that converted into a double bed, a sleeping area over the cab and an annexed bedroom.

By the time morning arrived, the Mexico border was in their sights.

Alex had driven 150 miles overnight.

‘Better get in your hiding places,’ said Molly, all motherly.

There was no point in complaining, they knew it was something they had to endure. The hidden compartments were not a far cry from coffins – although, perhaps smaller and more uncomfortable. They had to keep silent and still. It was essential that things like sneezing, coughing and snoring were avoided. They sensed the motorhome pulling up at the border. Then they heard muffled chatter followed by the side door opening and heavy footsteps above them. They held their breaths. Their heartbeats pounded loudly in their chests. If they were discovered, it would be all over. Poor old Alex and Molly would be embroiled in their antics. But then the side door slammed shut and the motorhome began to move again. Five minutes later, Molly began the process of lifting the rugs and then the floor panels, and then filled the kettle.

For now, they were in the clear.

‘Welcome to Mexico!’ cheered Alex.

Across the border and not in the USA anymore, they assumed that their troubles were behind them and they could relax a little, but this was just the beginning. The other countries they would be passing through on their mammoth journey over the next couple of weeks were: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile.

Fortunately, Alex and Molly were experienced travellers. They knew the procedure at the many border patrols which were far from consistent. Some demanded payment by corrupt border patrol guards. Some were over the top with paperwork and some kept them waiting for hours. It was all very intimidating and frustrating and involved much time spent in the hidden floor compartments. The complex paperwork began to mount as did the frustration.

Sanitation was always a problem from the word go. One rather old and stained chemical toilet was completely inadequate for six people. When Arawn went, it was a no-go area for hours. Often, the interior of the motorhome became a very whiffy place. Campsites were few and far between and when a decent one was found, every amenity was used. All credit to Alex and Molly, they were exceedingly tolerant of the four Marutukians.

From morning until evening, the smoky old engine of the motorhome plodded away with Alex behind the wheel. He refused to let anyone else drive his precious machine. In one or two countries, the roads were so bad that the contents of the motorhome were shaken about

like the snow in a snow globe. That's when Molly was at her busiest, putting things back on the shelves. Other than all that, they had a mostly trouble-free journey – that is, until they entered Columbia.

'Er, Alex, I think we're being followed. A pick-up truck full of thugs, by the looks of them,' said Gareth warily.

'Darn it, I was hoping we would avoid the bandits. Oh well, no matter, we are prepared,' said Alex calmly.

'Prepared? What have you got, a machine gun somewhere in the back?!' panicked Caron.

'No, but *they* most likely have. Unfortunately, motorhomes are occasionally targeted in this area. The bandits commandeer them and use them as drug mules. There's nothing to worry about.'

'Nothing to worry about?! You're taking this very calmly,' shrieked Gareth.

'It is important that you don't offer any resistance. Let them get on with it. These people have no mercy, no compassion. They'll kill you as sure as look at you,' warned Alex.

'We do have a few tricks up our sleeves – well, the end of our fingers, you know,' said Caron.

'Yes, so I believe, but no amount of Kingdom magic will be a match for a machine gun. Gareth, could you take the controls?' asked Alex.

Gareth couldn't refuse as Alex was already out of the driving seat.

'Go easy on the brakes,' said Alex.

'What do we do then, just let them take the motorhome!?' howled Tegan.

'Don't worry, everything will be alright,' said Molly calmly.

'Quickly, gather up the paperwork. Remove all your valuables including your diamonds!' snapped Alex.

'Does that include my knife?' asked Arawn.

'Yes, quickly!'

It all seemed very strange, as though Alex and Molly were following a well-rehearsed plan, but nothing made any sense. Molly took the paperwork and valuables and put them all in an old biscuit tin. Alex quickly moved the carpets, opened up the secret compartment in the floor and Molly climbed in with the biscuit tin.

'See you later,' said Molly calmly.



The four passengers were bewildered but accepted that there must be a good reason for their strange antics. Alex hastily replaced the floor panel and the carpets.

The pick-up truck full of bandits had followed them for long enough. It was time that they made their move and acquire the motorhome. They began to overtake with horns blazing. The pick-up truck rapidly manoeuvred in front of the motorhome and screeched to a halt. Gareth stood on the brake pedal. All four wheels locked, resulting in everything not firmly fastened down, flying into the cab area – this included humans.

‘I did say...’ began Alex.

‘Sorry,’ said Gareth.

Several angry-looking men quickly climbed out of the back of the pick-up, all carrying rifles. One of them yelled out...

‘Sali! ...Sali!’

Despite bawling in Spanish, his abrupt instruction was all too clear. Everyone hesitantly climbed out of the motorhome. The bandits began frisking them from head to foot, deliberately taking their time on the two Queens. Arawn wished he had his knife. He certainly would have used it. The Queens were equally desperate to use their lightning bolt finger trick, but with fortitude, they resisted. When the frisking was over, another word was yelled by one of the bandits...

‘Llave!’

‘In the ignition,’ said Alex calmly, he obviously knew a little Spanish.

Minutes later, they were pitifully watching, their home, their transport, their means of deliverance, disappearing into the distance along with the pick-up truck, following behind. They were stranded with absolutely nothing, no passports, no paperwork, no money and no change of clothes – and no Molly.

‘Now what do we do?’ fretted Gareth.

‘Well, we could phone for a taxi. Oh, sorry we can’t, the mobile phone is in the biscuit tin,’ mocked Tegan.

‘Just be patient,’ said Alex.

That’s all Alex would say. This became a little frustrating especially as they were all melting in the heat. Not a single vehicle passed them by. They were in the middle of nowhere with no sign of life or salvation. Finally, after half an hour, or an hour or two hours, no one had a watch, they heard a vehicle approaching in the distance. It simply had

to stop. It was probably the only vehicle they would see all day.

As the boxy vehicle got closer, it looked familiar, very familiar. It was their motorhome with Molly driving.

‘That’s my girl!’ cheered Alex.

Molly stopped the vehicle at their feet and climbed out with her ever-present calming smile. An explanation was overdue.

‘There are a couple of taps in the hidden compartment. One injects oil directly into the engine and the other shuts off the fuel,’ explained Alex.

‘Very clever. So, the engine starts billowing smoke with the oil and then breaks down when the fuel is cut off?’ surmised Gareth.

‘Correct. Not the first time we’ve had to go through that with the bandits,’ said Alex

‘May have slightly overdone it with the oil this time,’ said Molly looking not so much a frail old lady anymore.

## Chapter 32

### A familiar face

It took a while to get everything back in order. The thick smoke from the engine had well and truly penetrated the interior. On the plus side, this had deterred the bandits from lingering inside the motorhome before they abandoned it, but smoke is a dirty substance. The smell lingered and near enough everything was covered with a black sooty film.

They found a river and filled up with water. With all hands on deck, they quickly wiped down everything but they were falling well behind schedule.

Fortunately, there were no more bandit encounters, but two weeks drifted into three weeks and three weeks drifted into four. Finally, after a tanker's worth of fuel, several punctures and many breakdowns, the white peaks of the Patagonian mountains appeared in the distance.

Several times during the journey, Molly's mobile phone rang. There was only one place out of earshot of the rest, but if Arawn was in the toilet compartment, she had to whisper and be sparing with her answers. Each time, after the call, she would go and whisper something in Alex's ear. He would usually respond by putting his foot down, but this made little difference. The motorhome seemed to only have two speeds – moving and not moving.

'Forty-five miles to the rendezvous point and we have to be there in just over an hour,' shouted Alex over the noise of the highly strained engine.

This anxious comment came after another phone call and a whisper in Alex's ear. Naturally, there was now, an important question to ask but Gareth chose to ask another.

'That's only averaging 45 mph. Surely that's no problem?'

But of course, it was a problem. Despite the motorhome having a three-litre engine, it was pulling four and a half tons and had the shape of a shoebox. Now to the more important question, which Queen Caron was impelled to ask.

‘Rendezvous point? Who are we rendezvousing with?’

‘You’ll see soon enough,’ said Molly.

Alex was too busy racing up and down the gears to reply.

Alex drove like the wind. He couldn’t afford to slow down for corners, straying hedgehogs or snakes. Instead of sitting down in the front with her seatbelt on, Molly spent all her time putting things back in the cupboards.

Then, suddenly, the road opened up and in the far distance, they could see what they were *racing* towards. It certainly was a welcoming beacon of sorts in the wilderness and it was all ready to go.

‘A hot air balloon, for us?’ cheered Queen Tegan.

Alex and Molly didn’t answer, they were far more concerned about the smoke or steam that started billowing out of the front of the vehicle. Then the engine started making a strange knocking, tapping noise. Two miles to go, two miles, that’s all it had to do. The wonderful vehicle had just done six thousand, surely it could last another two. The knocking noise got louder and louder and the smoke or steam started to penetrate through the floor. Alex worked his way down the gears as the engine, slowly but surely began to lose power. Sweat dripped off his forehead. He could only do his best.

The motorhome rolled the last hundred yards under its own momentum, right into the shadow of a huge hot air balloon. It was hardly the first one the Queens, Gareth and Arawn had seen, but it was a welcomed sight. For some reason, it seemed to be especially large. The basket attached, also seemed especially spacious. All six occupants hastily vacated the smoky confines of what had been their home for nearly four weeks. Before they could establish who was providing the welcomed transport back into the Kingdom, they were distracted by the motorhome suddenly bursting into flames behind them.

‘Alex! Your motorhome!’ screamed Queen Caron.

‘It doesn’t matter now, it’s done its job,’ said Molly calmly. ‘Go on, ask them, Alex.’

‘Er, with your permission, your highnesses, we would like to become your subjects,’ said Alex humbly.

This was a turn-up for the books. For the last four weeks, Alex had been mostly grumpy and condescending. True, there had been moments where a smile almost broke the surface letting his true nature shine through, but overall, he was hardly the life and soul of

the party. Now, suddenly, he was calling Caron and Tegan, your Highnesses, and being polite.

‘Please, you need to hurry!’ said someone with auburn hair and a familiar voice, emerging from a large van parked a little way from the balloon.

‘Gwenda!’ they all cheered.

‘What are you doing here? I thought you said that you had to remain impartial. You couldn’t get involved,’ said Queen Caron.

‘Yes, I did. Remain impartial unless there are exceptional circumstances.’

‘Exceptional circumstances? What, exactly, are classed as exceptional circumstances?’ asked Queen Caron cagily.

‘I believe Alex and Molly have sought your approval to live out their final years in the Kingdom?’

‘Only if he cheers up a bit,’ said Arawn bluntly.

‘You’ll find, that Alex and Molly are extremely knowledgeable in many things, including Kingdom matters. Anyway, we have little time for idle chatter, I don’t know how long the wind direction is going to be favourable,’ said Gwenda, curtly.

It was regrettable. Gwenda showed all the signs of being a likeable, thoughtful and caring person. She wanted to chat, make friends, swap phone numbers, etc, etc. However, she had the unenviable task of being the head of the Protectorate. With that position came responsibility and detachment.

Six people in the basket was a significant weight for the balloon above, to lift. One of Gwenda’s helping hands showed Alex and Gareth how to operate the gas burner and a quick lesson on how to fly a hot air balloon.

There was no time to waste. It was a formal farewell, it had to be that way. They would never see Gwenda again. The tethering ropes were released and immediately, the huge balloon began to rise. Once more they found themselves in a wicker basket underneath a huge balloon. It was almost becoming commonplace. The Queens tentatively waved – Gwenda sneaked a quick wave and a warm smile.

There was quite a lively breeze which caught the balloon as soon as it gained sufficient height. Gwenda, her assistants and the big van, were soon, just a speck beneath them on the red dusty plateau between the mountains. The journey was largely out of their hands, it was where the wind decided to take them – hopefully, to the Kingdom.

It didn't take long for all six passengers to realise that they were ill-prepared. As to be expected, the temperature plummeted and the icy air penetrated through the wicker basket. No one thought to bring coats or even a blanket. Annoyingly, the motorhome was full of quilts and blankets, but it went up in flames. Already, the two new Kingdom residents were beginning to regret their brave new step in life. Strangely enough, Gareth could cope with the cold better than Alex, so he took charge of the burner, keeping the balloon sufficiently aloft to clear the mountain peaks. The snow-covered mountains unforgivingly continued for miles and miles in every direction. It was hard to believe that amidst this inhospitable landscape, there was a temperate Kingdom with dragons, magic and family.

'Are you sure we're heading in the right direction?' asked a doubtful Arawn.

'How should I know!' snapped Gareth.

'As long as the sun stays as it is now, on our left, we should be on course,' said Alex, knowledgeably.

It was a modest thirty-five-mile journey to the Kingdom, but thirty-five miles of endless snow-capped mountains in a lethargic hot air balloon is forever. Everyone imagined that they had frostbite in all their appendages and took it in turns to grumble. Tegan went a step further and suddenly started crying.

First Gareth attempted to console her and then her sister, both without success. Something was breaking her heart. Something was torturing her soul.

'What's wrong, sweetheart?' asked Gareth caringly.

'I've forgotten about my two beautiful boys. Why haven't I thought about them until now?'

'You've been under a lot of stress, sweetheart,' consoled Gareth.

'That's no excuse. It's unforgivable. You don't forget that you have two adorable children,' cried Tegan.

'It has to be an effect of Queen Mererid's evil. You can't be truly evil if you have love in your heart. I suppose, to become evil, everyone you love had to be forgotten,' theorised Caron.

'How could I possibly forget my children, for goodness' sake!' bleated Tegan.

'You were under a powerful spell. It seems your memory blockages are now dissolving away,' said Gareth.

Queen Tegan was now even more desperate to get home – back to the Kingdom. She stood aloft with her husband who was now, skilfully controlling the burner.

‘Is it my imagination or is that the top of the castle tower, over there in the distance?’ asked Tegan, excitedly.

‘I do believe it is. We’re home!’ rejoiced Gareth.

The deficient shelter of the wicker basket was no longer required, enthusiasm had returned. Everyone faced the bitter cold and gazed upon the Kingdom beneath. Alex and Molly had longed for this moment. It was no less than a dream come true. Queen Caron and Arawn were equally excited to be returning home after such a dangerous journey. However, as the balloon and basket cleared the mountain threshold, all was not as they expected. It should have been a truly awe-inspiring sight – the magical home of all the dragons. However, the normal flourishing colours of the hidden paradise were not present, they had dissolved away into cold blues and chilling whites.

All credit to Gwenda and her team, the course of the balloon was more-or-less, spot on. Gareth gingerly pulled on a rope attached to the part of the balloon called the parachute valve, releasing some of the hot air. For a complete novice, it was a near-perfect descent. Ideally, the football ground near the centre of town would have been the best place to land, but they had to make do with crash-landing on the outer edge of the Kingdom. There happened to be several disadvantages in landing in this particular area. Firstly, the ground was very uneven, covered in hard rocks. Secondly, it was some distance away from civilisation. And thirdly, it was right next to a cave which served as the Kingdom’s sewage outlet. This was a place, hardly ever visited due to the lethal bats which lived in their hundreds of thousands, inside the cave.

## Chapter 33

### A new ruler?

Queen Caron vividly remembered Grandpa's recollection of when he, Mum, Dad and Uncle Lloyd, passed through the sewage outlet, or toxic tunnel as it was better known. They encountered giant clam worms, giant dragonflies, killer moss and bats, all wanting to feast on human flesh. When they finally emerged from the tunnel, a frozen Kingdom greeted them, just like it was now.

The heavy impact of the basket colliding with the ground had inconsiderately sprawled the six passengers across the unforgiving ground. Apart from a few grazes, no one appeared to be seriously hurt. Everyone hastily got to their feet and brushed themselves down.

'This far out, I doubt if anyone has noticed us arrive. We have a long walk ahead of us,' said Tegan.

'Yes, and the sooner we start, the better. I don't fancy being nibbled at by killer bats,' said Gareth, anxiously.

'Huh, just when I thought I couldn't get any colder,' grumbled Arawn.

'Stop being a namby, a knight is not supposed to be able to feel the cold!' jibed Caron.

'There's a limit to everything,' huffed Arawn.

The ice-covered, uneven path, leading up to the outer edge of town, was truly treacherous. No one had the correct footwear and it was doubtful if Caron's and Tegan's four-inch heels would go the distance. It really was cold, not at all as it should be. No sheep or cattle in the fields, no leaves on the trees. The Kingdom was certainly, a very unwelcoming place. Alex and Molly tried not to show their disappointment, but they were both beginning to wonder what exactly, had attracted them to this place. Perhaps they would have been better staying put, in warm Texas.

Eventually, they reached the perimeter of the town – a gathering of small stone houses where the younger and fitter members of the Kingdom lived. The fantasy castle, clearly visible over the tops of the houses, was still a long way off. The slippery path now opened up into a cobbled narrow street. No one was about, except for a young boy,



dragging a small log behind him.

‘Hello there,’ said Queen Caron in Welsh. It was a language uncle Lloyd had taught her as a child.

‘It’s my log, I found it!’ growled the boy.

‘I don’t want your log, I just wondered... where is everybody?’ asked Caron.

The boy looked at her as though she was stupid. Surely, she knew that everyone was in their homes, under several layers of blankets, trying to keep warm. The boy didn’t seem to realise that she was one of the Kingdom’s queens speaking to him.

‘Aren’t you cold?’ asked the boy, noticing the inadequate clothing worn by all the strangers. ‘I’m going to try and burn this log at my grandmother’s. I’m sure she would welcome you and your friends to come and share the fire.’

Caron thanked the boy and followed him down several streets, getting ever closer to the centre of the town. Eventually, they arrived at a small stone-built house just like all the others. Everyone piled in and completely filled the cramped living room. Immediately noticeable was the complete lack of furniture apart from a rickety rocking chair with an old lady squeezed in it. She was shivering under several sheepskin blankets. The inside of the room was just as icy cold as the outside.

‘This is my Gran, her name is Odela. Gran, I’ve said these people could share the heat from this log – if I can get it to burn,’ said the boy.

Odela said nothing but gave her grandson an annoyed look. The boy placed the log in the fireplace and immediately set to work, trying to set light to the log with the flame of a candle. It was a feeble attempt; the log was too damp and the candle’s flame far too weak. Gareth had a go, but he should have known better. Meanwhile, Caron knelt and spoke to the old lady.

‘Could you tell me what’s happened here – what’s happened to the Kingdom?’ asked Queen Caron in a clear, precise voice, thinking she might be deaf.

Odela stared rudely at her and then stared even longer at Tegan. At first, Caron thought it was because she’d asked a couple of stupid questions, but then she realised, she was staring at her’s and her sister’s facial features.

‘You are twins? You look familiar,’ grunted Odela.

‘Yes, yes! You know who we are?’

'No, but you both carry the royal chin and eyes. Who are you? I have no food to give you!' she snapped.

'We don't want your food, perhaps you'd like a chocolate bar?' suggested Gareth.

Alex took a couple of chocolate bars from his backpack.

'This is Gareth, my husband, my sister, Tegan and her husband Arawn, Alex and Molly,' said Caron doing the introductions, but avoiding mentioning the fact she was a queen.

For a couple of minutes, neither the boy nor Odela said anything, they were preoccupied with devouring the sweet, delicious, chocolate bars. This gave time for Odela to think.

'Are you from the Netherworld?!' giggled Odela.

'Well yes and no. Now tell me, why is the Kingdom frozen?' asked Caron again.

Odela paused for a moment while she took several shallow breaths. Tears began to form.

'It's all my fault, every bit of it, my fault!'

Odela put her face in her hands and began to wail as very old ladies can be known to do. Caron tried to console her for whatever reason she was crying about.

The old woman pushed Caron away and then calmed herself. It was something she had never told anyone before, but now it was time to reveal her terrible mistake – her incompetence that had troubled her all her life.

'The King died a year ago and his son Rosh became the rightful King.'

'Whoa, just hang on a minute, Rosh? King Rosh? What the devil are you on about? He was our great uncle. He died years ago!' scowled Caron.

An awkward silence followed which gave time for Queen Caron to think. Suddenly it was all as clear as mud, but somehow, she knew exactly what Odela was about to say.

'Don't tell me, illnesses have returned, clouds have shielded the sun and the women have become barren,' recited Caron. She remembered Grandpa's words precisely.

'Yes, yes, exactly,' said Odela.

'You're the midwife who mixed up the twins – our grandpa and great uncle Rosh,' scorned Caron.

‘Yes, of course, I remember, Odela the scatter-brained midwife!’ cheered Queen Tegan. ‘But grandpa Java has been dead for years.’

‘Java dead? No, he can’t be! He is the only chance of the Kingdom returning to normal,’ bleated Odela.

Of course, discounting the six visitors encountering some kind of time travel (it was a magical Kingdom), Odela’s was clearly deranged. Her incompetence had obviously progressed into madness. Queen Caron quickly came to this conclusion.

If the queens had thought logically about it, they would have realised that Odela was the midwife of their long-dead Grandpa Java. This would put her age well over a hundred. Something was very wrong indeed.

‘Anyway, thank you for your hospitality, it’s time we were moving on,’ said Caron politely, knowing full well that there hadn’t been any noticeable hospitality.

Back on the cobbled streets, there was only one direction to take.

‘We have to get to the castle. Mum and Dad will fill us in with what’s going on,’ said Caron.

‘Mum and Dad?’ questioned Alex.

‘Larry and Jennifer. Jennifer is King Java’s daughter,’ explained Gareth.

They walked past several stone cottages, all with iced-up windows. Not a soul was to be seen. It was all very eerie and not at all like the Kingdom should have been.

Eventually, they reached the drawbridge. Fortunately, it was lowered. The magnificent castle was as always, a humbling sight, towering into the clouds above them. They managed to get halfway across the courtyard before several guards appeared from nowhere, most likely from the shelter of their huts.

‘Halt! Who goes there?!’ bawled one of the guards.

‘You dimwit! It’s us, the Queens,’ said Queen Caron.

‘Queens from where!?’ another guard bawled.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, this is ridiculous. Arawn, tell them!’ yelled Caron.

‘Caron, I don’t recognise them, any of them. Something strange is going on,’ said Arawn uneasily.

‘Fetch the king!’ commanded another guard.

‘King? What the hell are you on about?’ screamed both Queens.

The sensible thing to do would have been to run for it. At face value, it seemed that the Kingdom had suffered an uprising while the Queens were away and now had a new ruler with unsympathetic guards. Of course, rulers of the Kingdom must always be of royal blood and be the firstborn of identical twins. To break this cycle would spell certain doom for the Kingdom. The Queens decided to stay around and see what imbecile had fraudulently assumed the position of sovereignty.

Minutes later, the guards began to tremble on their feet, with the sound of many doors in the castle opening and slamming shut. Clearly, a bad-tempered, overbearing, illegitimate ruler was about to appear.

The man was a king, there was no disputing it. He wore a crown, all the lavish clothing and an expression to match. He also looked familiar.

‘Grandpa?’ said Tegan doubtfully.

‘He’s not Grandpa, he’s Grandpa’s brother, Rosh,’ whispered Caron with a certain dread.

‘Who are you!?’ roared the king.

‘We are Caron and Tegan, the rightful Queens to this Kingdom. Who, the devil, are you?’ said Tegan bravely.

The king went silent for a moment of thought and then gave his instructions.

‘Lock them all in the dungeons,’ he commanded and then promptly returned to the warmth of *his* castle.

The dungeons were truly awful, they hadn’t been used for decades – certainly not in Caron’s and Tegan’s reign. However, despite this, there was evidence that they had been used recently. Some chains had fresh blood stains on them and there were recent markings on the walls.

Six people, in a dismal dungeon, chained up in a line along an icy cold damp wall, with rats scampering around their feet, was how most nightmares begin – or end.

‘I don’t understand, this isn’t right. Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?!’ screamed Caron.

## Chapter 34

### Cures and potions

‘Will someone tell me, what the hell is going on!?’ repeated Queen Caron.

‘Try not to move, you’ve had a nasty bang to the head,’ said Larry – her father.

For such a rough and heavy landing, it was a miracle that all but Caron had escaped with barely a scratch. Unfortunately, Caron had hit her head heavily on a rock and passed out. Somehow, she was now in her soft warm bed in her royal boudoir. It was a somewhat crowded room despite its size. Her husband, Arawn was by her side. Queen Tegan was there with Gareth and the twin boys, noisily chasing each other around the room. Larry and Jennifer (Mum and Dad) were also adding to the throng. Newcomers to the Kingdom, Alex and Molly, were not part of the royal family so they weren’t allowed in the royal room. The housing officer was their first port of call.

‘Are the others still chained up in the dungeons?’ asked Caron deliriously.

‘Dungeons? Why would they be in the dungeons? Your family is here,’ said Jennifer – her mother.

‘Thank god you’re back in the land of the living,’ said Queen Tegan. ‘You didn’t half give us a fright. A right whack to your head.’

‘Bit of a rubbish landing, I’m afraid. We were all thrown from the basket,’ said Gareth.

You didn’t do all that badly. You got us down, that’s the main thing,’ said Tegan.

‘Arawn carried you all the way into town, on his shoulders,’ said Gareth.

‘Is it icy out there or did I dream that too,’ asked Caron.

‘No, you didn’t dream that bit, it’s freezing out there. Your breath in the bellows didn’t work. The dragons haven’t performed their warming duties since you left,’ said her father (Larry).

‘Did Brathen find her way back to the Kingdom?’

There was a detectable moment of silence before Larry answered.

‘Yes, Brathen’s back,’ he said concisely.

‘Well, at least that’s one good thing. Come on then Tegan, better do our duties,’ said Caron wearily.

‘You’ll do no such thing! We’ve put up with the cold for a few weeks, we can wait a few more hours. Summon the dragons in the morning,’ suggested her mother (Jennifer).

The next morning, Queen Caron was back to her normal bubbly self, but it wouldn’t last for long. She gazed out her bedroom window over the frozen Kingdom. It was picture perfect, a beautiful winter scene with the contrast setting on full. Every roof she could see was covered in snow and glistened, appealingly, in the bright sunshine. Countless sparkling icicles draped the town like Christmas lights. Children were playing on their wooden sledges and having snowball fights. It was paradise, there was no other word for it, but it was cold – very cold. It seemed such a shame to spoil it all by enlisting the dragons to warm the Kingdom. Perhaps no one would object to a few more days like this. Of course, this is exactly how the Kingdom would be without the dragon’s help – it *was* deep within the Patagonian ice field, after all.

Apart from the ice and snow, everything was exactly as it was before Tegan left, except for an enormous tent in the town square. As is the way with identical twins, they tended to do the same things at the same time. They had both been looking out of their respective windows and spotted the tent. Not for the first time, they bumped into each other in the corridor outside their rooms. They rushed down the stairs, across the courtyard and over to the very large tent, made out of rough sacking material. With such a large tent, they should have figured out what was most likely inside, but they hadn’t.

What greeted them was simply horrifying. Inside the tent was a dragon, a gigantic dragon. It was Brathen – or to be more precise, what was left of Brathen. The Queens were overcome with emotion and shock. It was almost too painful to see. A log fire crackled away towards the edge of the tent, to add a degree of warmth, but this was in no way a healing process. Brathen was at death’s door. The Queens ran over and stroked her long scaly neck. They were now able to communicate but in a very basic way. They saw her memories of the horror she had suffered, the bombardment of missiles and the never-ending gunfire from the Netherworld aircraft. For thousands of miles, she was tormented and brutalised, but still, she kept on flying while keeping a tight grip on the ropes attached to the wheelie bin. Her only

concern was for her new child. With hardly anything left of her wings, it was a wonder she could fly, but clearly, she had done and managed to return to the kingdom. Her once beautiful scales were now cracked and chipped, her feet had claws missing and her beautiful deep penetrating eyes were no longer diamond-clear, but shattered and crazed. She couldn't possibly recover from this. No amount of the Queen's blood would heal her massive injuries.

Finally, after relaying her terrible experiences, Brathen slowly moved one of her broken and damaged wings to one side. Behind it, hiding between her legs was her child, her precious baby dragon. He was still and lifeless, but she had brought him home.

The Queens were too overcome to notice Larry and Professor Deri enter the tent.

'We didn't know what else to do. She arrived here in this pitiful state, her dead child in her claws. We built this tent in an effort to keep her warm and comfortable, but she's showing no signs of recovering,' said Larry softly.

'How could they have done this,' cried Caron.

'Complete Barbarians. First things first, I think we ought to get some warmth into the Kingdom. Professor, could you fetch the horn and attachment, please,' requested Tegan wisely.

If the Kingdom returned to a balmy climate, the tent could be pulled down. Warm fresh air may be the tonic Brathen needed. Minutes later, the Professor returned with the golden horn and 'Y' piece. The Queens left the gloom of the tent into the fresh cold air and prepared themselves. Several deep breaths were always advisable before blowing the horn. As usual, the horrendous noise grated the bones in everyone's inner ear. Four times they blew the horn and then waited. As usual, a rumbling started from all corners of the Kingdom. The dragons were stirring in their caves. The rumblings got louder and louder and then developed into screeching and wailing – it was an unearthly sound. However, the dragons had no intention of leaving their caves, especially in the absence of Brathen, their leader. They all sensed what had happened to her and her child. Not for the first time, they didn't trust humans – even the Marutukians. The Queens blew the horn again, but still to no effect.

'Why aren't the dragons coming out,' cried Queen Tegan.

'They're all too scared, can't you hear them? They won't do anything without their leader,' said the Professor.

'How can dragons be scared of anything? They're the ultimate in

fearless,' bleated Caron.

It had been suspected for a long time that dragons had a mental bond with each other – a subliminal method of communication. Their current behaviour suggested that this was true. They were all aware of Brathen's terrible experiences in the Netherworld. This was enough to make even the fearless of creatures, terrified.

'Now what do we do?' groaned Tegan.

A familiar face approached the Queens. Not royalty, not a guide or a professor, but someone who overflowed with knowledge and wisdom, and if truth be known, a little grumpy too.

'The answer to your problems will be in the Kingdom's archives,' said Alex wisely.

'Archives? The Kingdom hasn't got archives!' snapped the Professor.

'You'll find it has, on the top floor of the castle's west tower,' informed Alex.

The fact of the matter was that it wasn't the first time that the dragons had been unwilling to emerge from the sanctuary of their caves. It wasn't the first time a dragon had been mutilated and it wasn't the first time that a dead baby dragon required resuscitation. The archives contained all the accumulated knowledge of the Kingdom, compiled and diligently updated over many, many centuries. Unfortunately, over the last seventy years or so, they had been completely forgotten about.

It was an arduous climb. The Queens were the first to reach the top of the west tower, followed, several minutes later by Larry and the Professor, panting heavily. To their surprise, the 139 steps led right up to a small oak door. It wasn't locked, which was a blessing, but the hinges were almost seized up. A stiff, heavy door was no match for the combined strength of the two Queens. Inside, the light from a tiny window shone through a thick curtain of cobwebs. The contents of the small room, mostly books, hundreds of them, were covered in a thick layer of dust.

'Oh, my goodness, all this knowledge under our very noses!' exclaimed the Professor, excitedly.

'It must have taken a thousand years to compile all this,' said Queen Caron.

'Probably a lot longer,' said Larry.

An instant decision was made. Every single book had to be removed and taken down to the castle dining room where it was a lot warmer.



It was a job for Arawn and his regiment. It would be an excellent training exercise for them.

Every book was large, thick, and heavy. One at a time was all the men could manage. As there were only forty in the regiment, each man had to scale the tower thirty-six times. If anyone cared to work it out, it was just over ten thousand steps up and down for each man. When the task was finally completed, all the men requested a couple of weeks of annual leave to recuperate.

The huge dining room table was just large enough to accommodate every book from the archive. Now it was the turn of the most knowledgeable people of the realm to read through them. As it turned out, there were only a few that fulfilled that requirement – the task was going to take a while. Conveniently, though, once the titles were sorted out, it turned out that only one book was particularly relevant. It happened to be the thickest and heaviest of them all and titled:

“Cures and potions”.

After several hours they found what seemed to fit the bill – a healing spell written in cryptic verse:

*“Slowly simmered bat eye broth  
Applied to skin with wings of moth  
Will return the spirit to all God’s forms  
Restore to health and dearth transforms!”*

‘That’s it! Return the spirit, death transforms. A spell to bring back life, it has to be!’ cheered the Professor.

Acquiring bat eyes was no problem. Bat meat had become a bit of a delicacy. ‘The gathering of bats’ from the toxic tunnel had almost become a sport, albeit a dangerous one. Usually, the wings, legs and heads of the bats were thrown away. Now someone had to extract the eyes from the many discarded bat’s heads. It fell on the castle cooks to perform this gruesome task. Others, namely the brave Marutukian army, had to go out in the dead of night with their candles and capture moths – the especially large ones.

After several hours, Alex and the Professor were ready to prepare the potion. Alex filled a large copper bowl with the bat’s eyes and simmered them slowly over a hot stove. Eventually, the eyes turned into a thick gloopy green goo. The largest moth wings were selected – finally, it was time to apply the potion.

Fortunately, at that moment, Gareth decided to pay Alex and the Professor a visit in their preparation room. Professor Deri liked to think it was a proper laboratory, but in reality, it was little more than

a wooden shed.

‘Ah, Gareth! Good timing. We’re about to try the potion,’ said Alex excitedly.

‘Think it’s going to work?’ said Gareth.

‘We can but hope. Look, the verse seems to apply: *Will return the spirit to all God’s forms. Restore to health and death transforms!*’ said Alex positively.

Gareth read the verse for himself.

‘Hmm, you do realise it says dearth, not death. Dearth means a shortfall.’

Alex and the Professor wanted to curse until the air was deep blue, but they had to settle on red faces instead.

‘Oh well, at least we have a potion to cure something or other,’ said Alex.

‘Back to the drawing board then,’ said the Professor.

Alex and the Professor returned to the dining room with the thick, heavy book. This time they would read the verses very carefully and if there was any confusion or doubt whatsoever, they would call on know-all Gareth to scrutinise their findings. Yes, it has to be said that they were becoming quite irritable and tired, they hadn’t slept for nearly two days.

Eventually, after many, many hours, it seemed that they found exactly what they were looking for. The particular verse of interest read:

*‘A blanket of green though not on a bed  
Will kill the living, but heal the dead.  
But man or beast this will not cure.  
Effective only for the young and pure’*

‘This has to be it, *‘heal the dead’*, but what the heck, does the rest of it mean,’ chirped the Professor.

It was certainly an opportune moment for Larry and Lloyd to enter the dining room.

‘Found anything?’ asked Larry cheerfully.

‘Yes, we think so. This verse, if we can decipher it?’ puzzled the Professor.

Larry and Lloyd read the verse and both instantly knew what it meant. It may have been over twenty years ago but it was something they would never forget.

'Killer moss!' they both cried out.

'Can't be anything else,' concluded Lloyd.

'So, I take it, it's lethal?' suggested the Professor.

'Certainly is, nearly had my fingers!' said Larry.

'Hmm, interesting. Lethal to the living, but a cure for the dead. This certainly is a magical kingdom. And where exactly, can this so-called killer moss be found?' asked Alex.

'In the sewage outlet – the toxic tunnel. Where your balloon landed. Where the bats, you know, the ones with eyes, came from,' jibed Larry.

'Yes, OK, apparently, Gareth has a loose tongue. You do realise we haven't slept for two days,' snapped the Professor.

'Sorry. Lack of sleep can be the *dearth* of you, you know,' said Larry, continuing with his mockery.

'Very funny. Well, being as you've *had* some sleep, we'll leave the gathering of the killer moss with you, then. We'll carry on looking for something to heal Brathen,' said Alex abruptly, his head returning to the book.

Without further ado, the Kingdom's army was enlisted again. As mentioned, regular ventures into the toxic tunnel for supplies of bat meat were now commonplace. Strangely enough, the rancid taste had become quite a delicacy. However, the killer moss was much further in and the further into the tunnel, the more dangerous it became. It was a task for Arawn and two of his bravest men. It always fell upon the army to go on such perilous missions.

Arawn came up with a brainwave. On his recent travels in the Netherworld, he recalled seeing small, narrow boats (canoes) on rivers and lakes. He decided to use his skills and construct something similar and use it to paddle along the stream, inside the tunnel. This *canoe* would transport the killer moss and avoid his men having to wade through the toxic water. Naturally, they still had to wear protective gear to protect them from the bats and all other flesh-eating creatures.

The next morning, the canoe was finished. It was a crude but sturdy affair, comprising a wooden frame covered in dragon wing. Metal scoops to collect the moss and good old-fashioned oil lamps to light their way in the tunnel were loaded up.

There was quite a gathering near the cave, but wisely, not too close because of the bats. Queen Caron gave her husband, Arawn, a lingering kiss before the brave men donned their protective clothing.

It was now or never.

They placed the canoe on the toxic stream and carefully climbed in. Essentially, the stream was the entire effluence from the Kingdom, consequently, it gave off an unbearable whiff. The flow was fast and lively so oars wouldn't be required on the way in. After negotiating a narrow stretch of tunnel, it opened up into a huge cavern – home to all the flesh-eating bats. It wasn't long before the pesky little creatures began bombarding the canoe and its passengers from all directions. There was no other way, they had to pass through this section of the tunnel before reaching the killer moss. It was nothing short of terrifying. The bats could *see* exactly where they were going and what they were trying to eat, with their sonar. The three soldiers struggled to see anything at all in the poor light of the oil lamps. Eventually, Arawn spotted the iridescent glow from the killer moss in the distance. Now, the eerie blue-green light was enough to guide their way.

It really was a nasty vicious plant, not at all like normal, soft and motionless moss. Millions of tiny tendrils, firmly attached themselves to anything that touched it. If it happened to be living, it would then proceed to squeeze every morsel of flesh off the bone. It certainly wasn't the easiest thing to gather up either. It clung to the scoops like sticky toffee pudding.

Half an hour later, the three soldiers had managed to gather up enough moss to fill the front and rear of the canoe. Now, they had to paddle against the flow of the toxic stream for the return journey. It was going to be laborious, painful and terrifying, but it was all in the line of duty.

It was almost as though the killer moss has some kind of basic intelligence, but of course, it hadn't. It was just mother nature, being diverse, extreme and perhaps a little quirky.

## Chapter 35

### A suitable name

Meanwhile, Alex and the Professor were convinced they had found a treatment for Brathen's grave condition. As with all the spells, potions and cures in the large, heavy book, it was written as a cryptic verse:

*"To heal a dragon whose demise is premature.  
Bathe in a drop of royal tear, will affect the cure"*

Arawn proudly carried two full bags of killer moss into Brathen's huge tent. His venture had been completely successful.

'Well done, my man,' said Alex.

Alex, the Professor, Lloyd and both Queens had been waiting patiently for some time for the killer moss. Now they had the lethal stuff, no one was sure how to apply it. However, the first hurdle was to separate Brathen from her dead child. This was a job for the Queens. They both stroked Brathen's long neck and asked her to release her child. The Queens' dragon was always compelled to obey, but this request pushed all boundaries. In her weakened state, her protest amounted to little more than a few huffs and groans. The Queens assured her with their thoughts, that it was for the best.

Hesitantly, Brathen moved her damaged wing to reveal her dead child and then distanced herself from him. Lloyd and Arawn were all prepared, wearing thick leather gloves. They proceeded to scoop the moss out of the bags and smear it over the dead child. They continued until all the moss was used up and the child was completely smothered. Brathen was helpless, probably bemused and reluctantly accepted the strange behaviour of the humans – within the constraints of dragon intelligence.

Immediately, the killer moss attempted to do what it did best. Its only purpose was to eat living flesh, but the flesh was dead. Before it could become a predator, it had only one option, to turn the dead flesh into living flesh. It was a sacrificial act for the moss. Millions of green tendrils embedded themselves into the dead baby dragon's skin. The living green matter frothed and oozed, covering every inch of the dead baby dragon. Slowly but surely, the green matter totally transformed into pulsating dragon flesh. The green matter continued to do its work

within the dragon's body, rejuvenating every part of its form.

After a nail-biting few minutes, suddenly and miraculously, the baby dragon began to twitch. The twitch turned into movement. His wings flapped, his eyes opened and he attempted to stand upon his delicate legs. He was alive. The moss had returned all the life force back to the youngster and completely sacrificed itself.

Despite Brathen's pitiful condition, she huffed and squealed with delight. The youngster shuffled over to his mother and snuggled back into her protective, but severely damaged wings. Real dragon tears began to flow down Brathen's scaly cheeks.

The Queens also couldn't hold the tears back, it was a wonderful, touching sight. This was all very convenient as Alex and the Professor were ready with two small glass phials – they had anticipated this moment.

'We need to collect a tear from each of you,' said the Professor without an explanation.

In the subdued light of the tent, there was a noticeable effect of the baby dragon's rejuvenation process. Queen Tegan noticed it first.

'Is it my imagination, or is the baby glowing green?'

'Good heavens, you're right! He's absolutely gorgeous,' chirped Queen Caron.

'Finally, I've thought of a name for him: DELIGHTFUL. D – for dragon, LIGHT – for the green glowing light and FUL – because he's full of charm,' said Queen Tegan – also dabbing her eyes.

At last, the new baby dragon had a name:

Delightful - The delightful dragon,

brought back from the dead.

## Chapter: 36

### Chinese lantern

The Professor insisted on being in charge of the procedure. New (*old*) boy, Alex, was making a habit of muscling in on his role as the insightful one. The Professor enlisted a few of the army to acquire a large watertight barrel, bring it into the tent and fill it with warm water – this took a while. Eventually, it was time to add the tears. This had to be done precisely, there was no room for error. The Professor had to add just one single drop of Queen Tegan's tears and one single drop of Queen Caron's tears to the barrel of water. Alex stirred the liquid thoroughly. It was now time for Brathen to have a bath – or to be more precise a good mopping. A couple of very long floor mops had previously been constructed ready for the occasion. It was down to Queen Caron to prepare Brathen for the soaking – she was not going to like it, but it was for her own good. No one was sure of the effects the solution would have on Delightful, so he was encouraged away from his mother. Predictably, this wasn't easy, but Delightful was hungry and half a dead pig was a perfect lure.

The Professor and Alex hesitantly began the mopping. At first, Brathen protested, but then she realised that it was actually, quite pleasant. Being soaked with warm water was very soothing to her wounds. Every last drop from the barrel was used. Alex and the Professor were fastidious – every part of Brathen's huge form, from head to talon, was coated with the solution.

As is customary with these magical healing processes, nothing happened for a while and then, almost imperceptibly, some kind of chemical reaction began to take place. Everywhere Brathen had a wound, a hole, a cracked scale or something missing, the special liquid began to erupt in oozing froth. Almost every part of her body became enveloped in this magical foam.

Half an hour later, the foam was all but gone. Brathen was restored – as good as new. The Queens' magical tears had done their work perfectly. Understandably, she was elated – as much as dragons can be. She stomped her talons, almost causing an earth tremor and then breathed fire out of her nostrils, the likes of never seen before. Unfortunately, the tent was made out of sacking, a rough kind of

hessian, which happened to be extremely flammable. In seconds the whole tent was ablaze with many people and a precious baby dragon inside. Instinctively, she flapped her enormous wings with such a tempest that the burning tent ripped away from its anchorage points and floated up in the air like a huge Chinese lantern. It was a kind of symbol to the Kingdom that Brathen was restored and in good health.

Brathen had no intention of hanging around, she had spent enough time in the presence of troublesome humans. She launched herself off the ground, hovered for a moment to pick up her youngster and then headed home – her long vacated mountain cave.

‘Well, that seems to be that!’ said Queen Tegan, positively.

It seemed only fair that they should leave Brathen in peace for a few hours before the Queens summoned her to initiate the climate warming process. The children could carry on sledging and having snowball fights for a little while longer.



## Chapter: 37

### The awards

It was mid-morning the following day and time to try again.

The Queens blew hard, four times, into the ‘Y’ piece attached to the golden horn. The expected grating noise reverberated painfully around the Kingdom. Every adult had their fingers in their ears and the remaining fingers crossed. The children were quite happy with the snow and cold – they didn’t cross their fingers. For a few moments, nothing happened and then, suddenly, Brathen now healed and with restored magnificence, flew out of her cave. This was a clear sign for all the other dragons to follow. It was a sight that tingled the soul. Hundreds upon hundreds of dragons began to encircle the Kingdom. They were all waiting for Brathen to give some kind of signal.

Yes, she was grateful for her baby being resuscitated and herself healed and rejuvenated, but the humans were wholly responsible for all her sufferings. Even the limited intelligence of a dragon understood the concept of retribution. She would hang on and make the humans sweat it out for a few minutes. Predictably the Marutukians began to groan, some began to weep. The members of the royal family buried their heads in their hands. Rapidly, people began to resign themselves to an icy Kingdom for eternity.

When Brathen was satisfied that they had suffered a little, she emitted a small snort of fire through her nostrils. That was the simple command. That’s all it took for hundreds of dragons to begin the warming process. The skies above the Kingdom were suddenly filled with flames of dragon breath. The heat was intense, the flames spectacular. In minutes, all the snow had gone and the icicles completely melted away. Soon, the air temperature was a balmy 21 degrees – warm enough for anyone.

The second ice age to suffer the Kingdom had ended.

Now all that was over, it was time for celebrations. The Kingdom just loved celebrations and now with a council, it would be organised properly. This time it was to be in honour of the people who had saved the Kingdom. For this occasion, special medals were made.

Now pleasantly warm, people left the shelter of their homes and

ventured out into the streets, the town square and the shops. Once more, people sunbathed on the man-made sandy beach and swam in the man-made sea. Other people got involved in organising the celebrations for the awards ceremony. The podium and seating had to be erected and the decorations put up.

Three weeks later, it was Awards day. Everyone was dressed in their finest clothes. The Queens were dressed as Queens should be dressed, in lavish long flowing gowns. This was a complete contrast to their appearance in the Netherworld.

Before anything else, the awards were presented.

The first award was for absent friends:

Tom: He went beyond the call of duty, putting his life in danger and helping people he didn't know.

Gwenda: She was like a fairy godmother, always watching over, always caring.

Two medals were ceremoniously put in a decorated wooden box.

The next awards were in the bravery category:

Gareth, for level-headedness.

Arawn, for steadfastness.

Two soldiers, who accompanied Arawn into the cave.

The queens pinned the medals on their chests and then kissed them passionately – not the soldiers, obviously.

The next awards went to ingenuity:

Professor Deri: For dedication.

Alex: For intuitiveness.

The queens pinned the medals on their chests and shook their hands.

They also were presented with a joint award for outstanding contributions to 'Glamour and beauty' – a special award nominated by virtually all the middle-aged and older women.

Due to a misinterpretation of the verse, there happened to be a large amount of bat-eye gloop surplus to requirements. Alex and professor Deri were determined to find a use for it. They studied the words of the verse once more.

'Clearly, it goes on the skin and dearth transforms must mean it restores,' said Alex.

'It's a skin rejuvenation potion. It has to be!' cheered Deri.

As predicted, the bat-eye gloop, when applied to the face with moth

wings, completely removed wrinkles and many signs of ageing. After application, seventy-year-old women suddenly passed as thirty. However, it turned out that there was a serious downside to the treatment. Exactly four weeks after the first application, the wrinkles and ageing lines suddenly returned, instantly and more pronounced. Conveniently for Alex and the Professor, this downside came to light, long after the joint award was dished out. When this happened, naturally, the women were horrified; they demanded more of the gloop to be applied. Queues of desperate women suddenly appeared outside the newly set up beauty parlours – day and night. But it was worse than that, much worse. As time went by, it became apparent that the reapplication period exactly halved: Four weeks became a fortnight, a fortnight became a week etc. Some bright spark worked out that after just eight weeks, she would have to have the revolting substance permanently on her face to have any effect. Of course, she wasn't a bright spark at all or she wouldn't have had the treatment in the first place and just accepted nature's ageing process, gracefully.

Once again Alex and the Professor, mainly the Professor, had bungled it – catastrophically this time. Many women demanded that they should be stripped of their award and thrown into the dungeons. However, the elected council unanimously disagreed with a verdict that the women should have known better.

You can never, ever cheat on nature.

Anyway, back to the awards.

Finally, the Award for contribution and dependability.

Many people were entitled to his award, but it was narrowed down to Larry, Jennifer, Lloyd and Molly.

Now that the awards were over, they could get on with everything else. It was time to eat, drink and then let their hair down. A new addition to these celebrations was an area set aside for dancing. New dance moves, introduced by the Queens, were encouraged. The music was performed by the recently formed pop group, called for some reason: *'The Drag ons'* – three boys dressed as girls and three girls dressed as boys. The Kingdom really was becoming liberalised, much to the consternation of the elderly. Some of the music was completely new, some of it old and traditional, some of it definitely an acquired taste.

As always on occasions such as this, at the end of the day, there was a flying display performed by the dragons. The Queens blew the horn five times. The noise was excruciating, but it was going to be worth it.

Nothing happened for a few moments (the dragons always like to add to the drama), but then, suddenly, without warning, the skies exploded with dozens of specially preened dragons. The sun had fallen behind the mountains making their polished scaly bodies and flat mirror-like wings glisten in the half-light. The first flypast was the classic arrow formation with nine of the largest dragons all breathing fire. Then, nine of the smaller dragons did a double loop – almost touching the ground and then touching the clouds. Two very energetic young dragons performed a perfect vertical flight, reaching so high in the sky that they almost disappeared. After that, several teams of dragons approached from all points around the Kingdom and weaved in and out of each other. So perfect was the choreography that not a wing touched. This amazing display went on for a good fifteen minutes, but it seemed much shorter. The people were completely agog with the spectacle, applauding loudly and cheering throughout. Then finally as a special treat for the audience, Brathen and her young child, Delightful, suddenly appeared, dominating the skies. She was immensely proud of her son, all the time encouraging him but carefully watching over him at the same time.

‘He’s gorgeous! He’s Delightful!’ they chanted.

‘Look, I do believe he’s glowing... the colour of an emerald!’ shouted someone in the crowd.

He wasn’t exactly an adept flyer yet, but that didn’t matter at all. To end his very first display, Delightful approached the Queens, did his best to hover and then did a shaky bow.

At last, it was another perfect day.

## Chapter: 38

### Cure all

The Kingdom was back to normal – as normal as it could ever be. The place called the Woods-with-no-wood was made a no-go area even though evil Queen Mererid's ashes were now dispersed and assumed harmless.

Alex and the Professor continued to study the Kingdom archives – mainly, the never-ending book of cures. They subsequently discovered potions for colds, headaches, toothache, arthritis, fevers, and many other ailments. However, the bat-eye gloom rejuvenation debacle was enough to discourage everyone from using them.

Sadly, there was one thing that couldn't be cured by any potion.

Far above the Kingdom, on one of the now unused viewing platforms, stood a lonely man. He was suitably dressed for the harsh environment with a thick fur-lined hood and sunglasses hiding his identity. He gazed down over the idyllic Kingdom. Tears formed in his eyes and his heart ached, but he was a doctor, he knew an aching heart was just a figure of speech. However, he was under a powerful spell...

cast from a beautiful Queen from a magical kingdom.

## **Other books by Will Harvey**

### **Kingdom of Queens**

**(The precursor to this story)**

Grandpa has a pressing story to tell his twin granddaughters, but it is real or imaginary? He tells of an ancient Kingdom deep within the Patagonian ice fields, which is completely inaccessible and hidden from the rest of the world. This is as intended as it happens to be the home of all the surviving dragons. The fabled creatures now have only two purposes; to protect the people of the Kingdom and keep the climate temperate with their fiery breath. Unfortunately, the survival of the Kingdom and the dragons are now seriously threatened – Grandpa is the only one who can restore the Kingdom to its former glory.

### **The Residents of Wardate**

Poppy Cock is a charismatic TV correspondent who suffers horrific burns from a callous incident while on an assignment.

Although the autonomous android, Madeline Bull, is truly groundbreaking, there are insurmountable problems. The solution: four brilliant scientists decide to interface Poppy Cock's disfigured body to their Madeline Bull android using the latest medical techniques and cutting-edge technology. The price for this convenient arrangement – Poppy must die and become Mad' Bull to fulfil her intended purpose, to exterminate The Residents of Wardate – a gathering of the world's most evil people

# **Return to Wardate**

## **(The second instalment of the Wardate saga)**

Madeline Bull returns as the feisty android in this final instalment. This time Madeline faces her biggest challenges yet. The world is purposely charged with hatred and a new world war is on the horizon. Enter Madeline to thwart the dissenters and calm the world but there are far, far deeper concerns. For other reasons, the world is on the brink of obliteration, genocide is looming. Unknowingly Madeline has been modified and holds the key to saving the world – if she really wants to.

## **Ward off strangers**

### **(The final instalment of the Wardate saga)**

The saga of The Residents of Wardate concludes with Madeline Bull, the feisty android, returning to a world where people are disappearing in their thousands. This time she has to accept that she has finally met her match and there is no way out. All she can do is save everyone else and try to put the world back in order. The reward for her ultimate sacrifice is... Hope.

## **The fruits of Bohemia**

Sheridan Banner has a remarkable gift – a gift of perception to rival all who have preceded him. However, his unique abilities are perceived by others as little more than an irritation, until, one day, an abrupt stranger happens to call – the stranger's name is Mark Watson. His father has disappeared along with eighteen other people. Amongst these eighteen people is Sheridan's natural father – who he has never met.

Sheridan is unaware that he holds part of the key to finding them.

## **Again**

Two perfect people, Caban and Keeva, saved from a doomed world, have a very important job to do. 300 million years later absolutely everything rests squarely on their shoulders. It may well involve unimaginable sacrifices and dangers beyond imagination but to refuse the request of an alien, who looks like Caban's father, is simply bad manners. Caban and Keeva incidentally are Adam and Eve.

They say there's an explanation for most things in life... so just for a while, forget everything you know about everything and open your mind. All you really need to know right now is that a cheeseburger is the most underrated thing in the universe.



## The Author...



### **Will Harvey**

When the world is done and time is almost over, we will realise that imagination was always our greatest gift. With imagination, we can have what we can never have, go to places where we can never go, see things that we can never see and be someone that we will never be.